



Ballad of the Desert

Volume 1

Author: Tong Hua

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Chapter 1: The Past

The days pass as fast as the nightly desert winds, a moment becomes a thousand miles. It was supposed to be a brief respite after being injured, but the grass on the plains have wilted three times already and the leaves in the Hu Yang Forest have fallen three times already. Three years, over a thousand some days and nights, accompanying the wolf pack wandering from the North of the desert to the South, and then back up to the North again. Within the happy playing, I've almost never left the wolf pack. The six years spent with Papa appears to be buried underneath the yellow sand. Except.....it is but an appearance.

In the dark night, when all is quiet, next to the fire I sit with Brother Wolf. He's already deep asleep but I have not one whit of sleep in me. During the day, I glimpsed the Xiong Nu army, the first time in three years. Unexpectedly, under the thundering hooves of the horses, it awakened the buried past of years ago.

Nine years ago, Xi Yu desert.

A person lies in the desert. I stare at his eyes, he stares back at me. A lizard crawls over his face. He doesn't stir. I curiously use my paws to swat his face, but he still doesn't stir. But the corner of his mouth turns down, like he's smiling.

I investigated from sun up til sun down, finally realizing why he doesn't move. He's dying of thirst.

Even today I do not understand why I saved him? Why give him the sheep I worked hard to capture? Why did I find myself a Papa? Is it because his eyes has something that seems familiar, yet also unfamiliar? After feeding him fresh blood, he regained his strength, and then did the proverbial thing people are said to do – metaphorically stabbed me in the back he did. He used a rope to secure me and took me away from the Gobi desert where I lived with the wolf pack, bringing me into a tent where humans live.

He drank the fresh blood of the sheep, but forbade me from drinking blood or eating raw meat. He forced me to walk upright, forced me to learn to talk like him, forced me to call him “Papa”. For this I fought with him often, but he was never afraid. After every fight I would try to run away, and he would capture me back.

The torture was hard to endure. I didn’t know why he treated me this way. Why force me to be a human being? Is there anything wrong with being a wolf? He told me – I am a human, not a wolf, so I can only be a human. Once I started to write, I understood a bit about my past. I was a lost or abandoned orphan that was raised by the wolf pack, who treated me like a baby wolf, yet he is trying to turn me back into a human.

“I won’t comb anymore!” I screamed as I threw the brush down. I was so angry I wanted to take it out on something. My arms are tired and still my hair is a mess and I can’t make a simple braid. Initially I was excited to look at how pretty I looked by the edge of the river, but the ever messier hair left me with only a belly full of frustration.

A bright clear day, there was only one average sized cow by the river banks drinking water. I eyed the black cow and then walked behind it, delivering a huge kick to its flank hoping to shove it into the water. The cow moo’d but didn’t move. I wasn’t done with it so I kicked it again. With a flick of a tail and a head turned to look at me, I realized something was wrong. I found the wrong outlet for my frustration. The cow was a rock, and I was the egg.

I decided to go first and unleashed a wolf howl, hoping to scare it away. Usually when I did this, the horses and sheep would run away scared. But the cow just turned and pointed its horns at me, spitting mad. The second it started to move, I turned and ran with a scared scream. I finally understood why people used the phrase “bull temper” when chiding stubborn people.

I felt my butt hurt but I had no time to worry, turning left and right.....

“Brother Cow, I was wrong, please stop chasing me. I would never dare kick you again, I’ll only pick on the sheep from now on.” I was exhausted but the cow kept chasing. “Stupid cow, I warn you, don’t think I’m just a lone wolf right now, I have a lot of companions. When I find my companions, we’ll eat you.” My threats didn’t work, leaving me crying as I kept running.

Running out of breath, I said “If you....harm.....me.....my.....my Papa will cook you, so please.....stop chasing....chasing me.”

My words seems to have worked, as two people walked by, one of them Papa. I ran towards him, the first time he’s seen me wanting him as I reached my hands out and ran into his embrace. He grabbed me before realizing the cow was almost upon us. It was too late to dodge, when the other man suddenly stepped in front of Papa and faced the cow.

I stared wide eyed as the cow charged him, but with lightning quick reflexes he grabbed the cow’s horns and immobilized it. The cow tried to push forward but the man held his ground. I stare and thought to myself – if he was a wolf, he would be the leader of the wolf pack.

Papa held me and moved me aside. He smilingly complimented the man “Often hearing of my Lord’s title as the number 1 warrior of the Xiong Nu tribe, now I know the honor is well-deserved.” The young man smiled “Just a little brawn is all, used only to defeat a small cow. How can it compete with Teacher’s vast knowledge?”

The young man watched as I struggled out of Papa’s grasp. Papa said “All I know are the dead knowledge in books. My Lord has already learned more from the world.”

I walked over to the young man and kicked the cow “Chasing me? Still want to chase? Huh, huh? Kick you twice, for chasing me until I almost died.”

The tamed cow started to stir and Papa grabbed me again, apologizing

to the young man. "This is my little girl. She's got a willful temper. Apologies for creating problems for my Lord."

When Papa wanted me to bow, I stood there and stared, I was too young then to assess a person's looks, but facing someone that handsome was something even I could easily comprehend. I stared for a long while before blurting out "You are so good looking. Are you the most handsome man in the entire Xiong Nu tribe? But Yu Dan is also good looking. I wonder if he's as grown up as you, he will be as handsome as you?"

He lightly coughed twice and with a small smile sneaked a quick peek at Papa. He turned to manage the cow, while Papa quickly apologized for not teaching me proper manners. He let the cow go and turned to see Papa covering my mouth with one hand while restraining me with the other, while I tried to kick at him.

He shot Papa an understanding look "This is surely more difficult than taming a furious cow." How dare he compare me to a cow! I glared at him which only made him laugh. He told Papa "Since Teacher has pressing things to take care off, I shall be off."

Once he left, Papa dragged me back to the tent. I thought he would horse whip me like I've seen parents do to kids here on the plains. But instead he took out a comb and made me sit down. "Hair flying everywhere. The Lord might not be the best looking man in the Xiong Nu tribe, but right now you are surely the ugliest girl on the plains."

I immediately stilled and looked in a mirror. "Uglier than that old grandma who lost all her teeth we saw a few days ago?" "Yes." "Uglier than the fat woman who could barely walk?" "Yes." I stared at myself in the mirror, caked with dirt, hair everywhere, as scraggly as can be. The only thing nice was a pair of shining eyes.

Papa washed my face and braided my hair. "Let's braid two braids. I'll do one, and you can learn from me and do the other. Once we are done, you'll be the prettiest girl I have ever seen."

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The embers started popping, startling me awake. Brother Wolf stretched and then flopped back down. I patted his back and let my mind slip back into the past. That year I was perhaps 7 or 8 years old and had just started living with Papa for one year. That was the day I learned to braid my hair, and it was also the day I first met Yi Zhi Xie. A good friend of my Papa's, the uncle to the Crown Prince Yu Dan, the younger brother to the Shan Yu (the Leader of the Xiong Nu tribe). Because he often came to see Papa, we became very familiar with each other. He would take me along every time he went hunting.

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Papa won't let me attend the banquet unless I memorized the "State Manual". I chewed my nails and asked Papa why he doesn't just go teach Yu Dan, since Yu Dan is his student. Or have Yi Zhi Xie memorize it, which he would love because he loves reading Han books. I only like to hunt. Papa glared at me, so I shot back "Yu Dan doesn't ask me to address him as Crown Prince. And Yi Zhi Xie says I can address him by his name. Why can't I?"

Papa sighed and explained to me that these are the strictures of this world. They can address me directly, but I need to speak to them respectfully. In the wolf pack, little wolves also need to respect the older wolves. Yu Dan is 4-5 years older than me, and Yi Zhi Xie is 7-8 years older. I need to respect them.

I realized he made sense this time so agreed to address them as Crown Prince and my Lord. But I still didn't want to memorize the book today, I wanted to attend the banquet and eat roasted lamb meat. Dad took my hand out of my mouth and wiped it. "You're almost 10 yet you refuse to grow up. His Lord was already on the battlefield when he was your age."

I boasted that he couldn't beat me when we chased rabbits together. But I remembered my promise to him and clapped my mouth shut. "I promised I wouldn't tell otherwise he won't take me out playing anymore."

Please don't let him know." Dad smiled and brought up the "State Manual". I called him a villain and tromped off to memorize it.

Dad was called away by the Dan Yu, and immediately I ran outside to have fun. I found Yi Zhi Xie sitting by the slope and tip-toed over to scare him. When I got close, he suddenly lunged over and grabbed me, scaring me. I laughed and held him by the neck. "Yi.....my Lord, why are you here? I heard you are getting married and tonight's banquet is for you."

Yi Zhi Xie held me on his lap, asking if my Papa lectured me on proper manners, always forgetting that the Xiong Nu don't care about such formalities. He confirmed he was getting a lady wife. I looked at his face and asked why he wasn't happy? "Isn't she the only daughter of a great general and everyone wants her? If Yu Dan wasn't so young, the Shan Yu will surely have married her to him."

He smiled "Silly girl, pretty isn't everything. I'm not happy or unhappy."

"Papa says a married couple spends a lifetime together. I want someone good looking when I get married." I looked at his chiseled face carefully. "At least it can't be someone worse than you." Yi Zhi Xie laughed and tapped my cheeks "How old are you, already itching to leave your Papa?"

My smile froze, he and Yu Dan know how old they are, but I don't. I'm probably 9 or 10 years old right now, but there is no way to be certain. Yi Zhi Xie thinks it's a good thing, what others have no control over, I can choose for myself. I got excited "Yes, Yes, I can decide how old I am! I want to be 10, so I can make Mu Da Duo call me older sister."

He smiled and patted my head, turning to look towards the distance. I wanted to go hunting rabbits but he didn't agree readily as before. I asked what he was looking at, but he instead asked me what was due South East of here.

I named the sheep, the mountains, the Gobi Desert, then finally the Han kingdom, homeland to Papa, who says it's very beautiful there. Yi Zhi Xie remarked that the Xiong Nu lands are also quite beautiful. While the Han dynasty is nothing special, the current Han Emperor is someone special. I wondered if he was better looking than Yi Zhi Xie?

Yi Zhi Xie lamented being born a few years too late. He can only watch the Han dynasty continue to expand, little by little encroaching ever close to the Xiong Nu lands. General Wei Qing already is a headache. If a few more powerful generals emerge, with the power hungry drive of the current Emperor, the Xiong Nu tribe may one day be eliminated.

I looked East, and then back at him. I didn't say anything, just put my hand in my mouth to chew on my nails. I just looked at him as he lightly touched my eyes and his hands stopped at my lips. He smiled "I hope in a few years, you will understand what I am saying, and will still be willing to sit by my side and listen to me talk."

He took my hand out and wiped it with his sleeve. He pulled me up and said "I have to go back to prepare for tonight's banquet." I decided to go find Yu Dan to watch this afternoon's archery competition, hoping I don't run into Papa.

I hold a platter with a lamb's head and kneel before Yi Zhi Xie. Somehow my actions have transformed the formerly merry banquet into total silence. The Shan Yu pretends to smile, Papa looks torn, Yu Dan looks upset, and finally I peek at Yi Zhi Xie. His brows tighten for a second before his face is suddenly expressionless, but his eyes are warm. My shaking hands stop trembling under the eyes of everyone staring at me.

Yi Zhi Xie explains that I have never seen the power of the Shan Yu in action, so of course I will assume a small falcon is a great eagle. He announces that the biggest hero in the Xiong Nu today is surely Yu Dan, who didn't miss a single target in today's archery competition. He takes the lamb platter from me, giving me a wink, and goes to kneel before Yu Dan. He lowers his head and presents the platter to him.

Everyone claps and laughs, complimenting Yu Dan as having the prowess as a young Dan Yu did. Everyone goes up to toast him. Yu Dan, with Yi Zhi Xie still kneeling before him, takes a knife and slices off a piece of the lamb and pops it in his mouth. From beginning to end, Yi Zhi Xie humbly kneels before him with his head bowed. The Shan Yu finally smiles and goes to help Yi Zhi Xie up. The two share a toast.

I was the only one who didn't smile during the entire proceeding. I was huddling next to Papa, watching something I didn't fully understand. If it wasn't for my thoughtlessness, Yi Zhi Xie would not have to kneel before everyone, bow his head to someone younger and smaller than him.

Papa cheered me up, telling me to go memorize the "State Manual" and understand what I did wrong today, and learn to avoid such actions in the future. He thinks he also failed in teaching me.

I don't know how to ride so I can't go far to play. The only two people who dared to disobey Papa's rule and take me out to play – one I am avoiding because I did something wrong to him, the other is mad at me and won't come find me.

I saw Yu Dan by the river banks and ignored him to go play on the other side. He warned me to stay away from the banks in case I fall in since I can't swim. I walked into the river a few steps, leading Yu Dan to angrily pull he out. I yelled "Just because you are afraid and can't swim, I'm not afraid."

Yu Dan laughed "I'm the one who should be upset, but here you are yelling at me." I remembered what happened that day and felt some guilt. Yu Dan selected me to present the lamb head. But instead of presenting it to the Shan Yu, I presented it to Yi Zhi Xie. It upset the Shan Yu and caused trouble for my hero. I lowered my head and didn't speak.

Yu Dan grabbed my hand "If you're not angry anymore, let's go play." I tempered my smile but nodded my head. We held hands and started to run.

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When I was 10 years old, because of Yi Zhi Xie, it was the first time I understood the books Papa made me memorize every day. It was my first time observing the Shan Yu, Yi Zhi Xie, and Yu Dan. I started to realize that they were the closest of kin, but also could one day become what the Han books call kin killing kin.

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Yi Zhi Xie's wife combs her hair and asked her husband if he likes the new Han style. Yi Zhi Xie places a flower in the new hairdo and compliments her, which makes her blush. I furrowed my brows and let out a sigh, turning to leave. Suddenly a female voice called out "Who is there?" Yi Zhi Xie immediately calls out "Yu Jin, come inside."

I stood outside until I could force a happy face on before walking into the tent. I bowed to his lady wife, which caused a sliver of shock to pass over Yi Zhi Xie's face. She asked how he knew I was outside. "She's the only one going from tent to tent, the soldiers see her and don't mind. Other than her, who else can eavesdrop outside?"

She invites me to visit with the Shan Yu's wife to learn new Han hair designs and other such fun stuff. I decline, claiming I have no such talent to learn such skills, preferring just to chase rabbits. She smiles and pecks me on the cheek for being so sweet despite having heard rumors of my bad temper. She flounces off by herself after stating that Yi Zhi Xie is too busy to take me out hunting today. After she leaves is when I raise my hand to wipe where she kissed me.

Yi Zhi Xie looks at me and shakes his head with a smile. I let out a sigh and turn to leave when he gets up and asks me to wait. He grabs my hand "I still have some time to go out for a walk." He drags me along as we walk higher up the cliffs. "I haven't seen you in a long time. When I visit your Papa you are nowhere to be found. Did you make up with Yu Dan?" I nod my head, then shake it.

“Did you two get in a fight? You should use that fake act you just put on with Yu Dan. I’m sure you’ll get him all happy again” Yi Zhi Xie teases me.

I think to myself. Everyone knows how loving you are to your wife after the wedding. I don’t want you to be in a bind, so I purposely am nice to her. But why are you like this? Is it true you are only nice to her because her father holds the control over the army? Or to make her happy, you don’t care about what you used to like. “You are also fake, knowing you don’t like the Han hairstyle but lying that you do.”

He sits down and pulls me to sit next to him. He stares at me for a while and lets out a sigh. “Yu Jin, you’re starting to grow up.”

I grabbed my knees and also let out a sigh. “Were you really hurt that night? It was all my fault. I’ve listened to Papa and started reflecting.” Yi Zhi Xie stares off into the distance with a small smile, neither answering that he was hurt or not hurt. I stared at his profile, trying to figure it out.

“Why did you fight with Yu Dan this time?” I refused to answer. “Why are you so missish all of a sudden?” I bit my lips, “Yu Dan said that you only take me out to play because of Papa, is that true?”

He lowered his head and laughed, while I stared anxiously waiting for his response. He just kept laughing. I grew enraged so he coughed to control his laughter. He stared at me for a good long while before he suddenly lowered his head and whispered in my ear “because of your eyes.” When he stared at me, he stared so intently it was like everything he hid inside himself bubbled forth. It was intense, but I didn’t understand.

My eyes? I suspiciously rubbed my eyes and thought about it. But I still didn’t understand. But at least the worry in my heart was eased. I laughed. As long as it’s not because of Papa. All I want is someone who is nice to me because of me.

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My heart clenched, sighing as I rested my face on my knees. Stupid Yu Jin. Yi Zhi Xie could woo his lady wife, why can't he do the same thing to make the very silly me happy? Perhaps Yu Dan was right and I just refused to listen to him. Papa also foolishly trusted Yi Zhi Xie. It turns out that the hot-tempered rash Yu Dan was the most clear-headed amongst us all. Yu Dan, Yu Dan.....the moon is going down as the embers in the fire. Looking at the red flames that aren't very hot, it was like the sun the day Yu Dan took me to dig for birds nests.

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I list out all the books Papa wants me to memorize. How can I possibly memorize all that even in my entire lifetime? Why do I need to spend my days memorizing this stuff about court politics and warfare? Yu Dan comes to find me and I quickly drop my book and bound out of the tent, asking where he's taking me to play. I remember too late and have to add a courtesy afterwards. Yu Dan hits me on the head and reminds me they don't adhere to such formal gestures like the Han people do. He doesn't want me to learn from Papa and become a silly woman. I hit him back on the head, reminding him that his mom is a Han woman, so does that make her silly?

Yu Dan holds my hand and we take off running. He considers her a Xiong Nu once she married a Xiong Nu man. He pulls me up on the horse and we ride together, with him wondering why Papa doesn't allow me to learn to ride a horse. I explain how I used to always try to run away, how could he dare let me learn to ride a horse. Now Papa probably thinks my time is best spent reading.

Yu Dan smiles and says "My royal father says I can marry next year, asking if I liked the daughter of a Lord. I want to ask him to let you be my Queen." I shook my head "Nope. When I grow taller and learn more martial arts skills, I want to travel the world. Plus the Shan Yu and my Papa will surely not agree to let me marry you. You are the Crown Prince, and will be the Shan Yu one day. That Lord's daughter is suitable to be your wife."

Yu Dan stops the horse and carries me off “I can beg my royal father. Once you marry me, you will be the Xiong Nu Queen and can go anywhere you want. No one will stop you and no one will force you to study.” I counter with the fact that his mother never travels and doesn’t appear to smile much or seem particularly happy. The Han book says that despite being the ruler, one cannot do as one wishes. Yu Dan huffs that people are silly and he’ll do as he wishes.

I ask if he thinks Yi Zhi Xie is silly, because he spoke about a man learning to endure the vagaries of life. Yu Dan glared at me and then tromped off, muttering “Yi Zhi Xie, Yi Zhi Xie, humph!” “Why are all of you complimenting him – he’s smart, strong, brave.....” I laugh and tease him about being jealous. Yu Dan’s smile is cold as he says “What do I have to be jealous about? One day he will bow each time he sees me.”

I startle and grab his hand “Please don’t be mad. I didn’t say he was better than you. He has his strengths and you have yours. Right now you are not any less great than he is, and in the future you will surely surpass him.”

Yu Dan’s anger turns into a smile “Let’s stop talking about him, I brought you here to play, not to discuss him.”

We walk through the bushes making no noise when we hear a noise nearby. We see something that stops us in our tracks. It’s Papa and Yu Dan’s mom, sitting next to each other, faces pale, with Yu Dan’s mother crying. She leans her head on Papa’s shoulder and continues to cry. I wanted to ask why she isn’t crying to the Shan Yu when Yu Dan grabs my hand and tries to drag me away. Papa hears the noise and we show ourselves. Papa gives me a sad look while Yu Dan’s mother just stares at us for a few moments before walking away.

I ask about why everyone is staring and to explain what is going on. Papa opens his mouth to explain when Yu Dan lets go of my hand and runs off. Papa takes my hand and leads me away while I continue to pester him with questions about what just happened. Papa sighs, explaining that what is between a man and a woman is not something I can understand right

now. I argue that if he doesn't explain, I'll never learn.

Papa leads me to the banks of the lake and we sit down. He explains that he and Yu Dan's mom knew each other since they were young. She was just the daughter of an official, while he was an man who was eager to establish himself. When I ask why she didn't marry Papa and instead became the Shan Yu's wife, Papa ruefully wonders whether to tell the long or the short of it.

Back then, the Han dynasty could not defeat or conquer the Xiong Nu, so they elected to inter-marry to preserve the tentative peace. But the royal family did not want to sacrifice their own princesses, so they selected the most beautiful and talented daughters of the court officials and crowned them princesses before marrying them off to the Xiong Nu. Papa explained that he was too weak to take her to run away, and she couldn't abandon her parents to great dishonor and betrayal. So she married the Shan Yu, who did not know how to appreciate her. So she was just crying for her fate in life.

Papa sighed, wishing they were born a few years later, at this juncture when the current Han Emperor is on the throne. Perhaps everything would be different. His words triggered my memory of two years ago, sitting with Yi Zhi Xie before his engagement banquet. He wished then to be born a few years earlier, to be able to fight the current Han Emperor and determine a victor and a loser rather than watching the Hans continue to expand their empire into the Xiong Nu lands. One wanted to be born later, one wanted to be born earlier.

Papa asks if I understood and I truthfully reply that I understand about half of it. I got the politics part, but don't understand why Yu Dan was so mad back there. I promise Papa I will try to calm Yu Dan down. I then asked "Papa, in making me read all those books, is it because you don't want me to become only a flower?" Papa nods, he doesn't know if he's doing the right thing, he only knows that Yu Dan's mother learned all the female arts but continues to suffer. I promise Papa that I will never be a pampered flower. I want to be a great big tree, so that no one can make me suffer.

Papa rubbed my head “Your personality really isn’t like that (a flower). Because you’re so direct, I want you to learn to think carefully and observe people. To learn to strategize or else your stubbornness will lead you to be unable to endure and can’t protect yourself. I would rather throw you back to the wolf pack in that case.”

I mutter that I don’t want to be a person, but Papa laughs that I’m already a person and can’t even go back to being a wolf. Papa stares out onto the water “One day when Yu Dan becomes the Shan Yu, I’ll take you back to the Central Plains (Han territory). As my daughter you can’t stay here in the Xiong Nu too long. I only taught you to read and write Han characters, refusing to allow you to learn Xiong Nu for this reason. She....she will become the Dowager Queen and live well. Yu Dan will take good care of her.”

I wonder why he won’t marry her then? She can just get remarried. Papa sighs “A moment’s missed chance is a lifetime’s missed chance. A person’s life will have numerous instances where you won’t be able to turn back and get another chance.” I keep asking why not get another chance but Papa wants me to ask him again when we return to the Central Plains and I’ve grown up. He pulls me home to do more homework otherwise no dinner for me.

It wasn’t even a year later when the current Shan Yu died in an accident.....

I suddenly stand up and take a few deep breaths. I stare at the sun rising from the East. So it is that I still can’t think about the past without feeling a stabbing pain of hurt. The past is like the dying embers on the ground, all that remains is black dust. But if you want to sweep it away immediately, it will still burn your hands. But one day it will cool down.

Papa’s last words to me still resonate in my ears. “Yu Jin, Papa apologizes to you. I thought I would keep watch over you until you married and had kids. But now.....now Papa cannot return to the Central Plains with you. You must get back by yourself. This time you are the rabbit and they are the wolves. You have to escape and run with all your might. Once you

escape back to the Central Plains you will be safe. You must live well, promise Papa. No matter what you encounter, you have to try hard to survive and live as happily as possible. Papa's only wish is for you to live well."

The sun happily bounds up and shines over the plains. I turn my face to the bright light and exclaim "Papa, I am doing well and am very happy. You and Yu Dan's mom need to also be happy. And Yu Dan, you as well."

Papa never let me be a wolf, always wanting me to return to the Central Plains. But I needn't escape to the Central Plains to be safe. In this vast Xi Yu territory, no one can catch me of today. Not even Yi Zhi Xie, the Xiong Nu tribe's current Shan Yu.

Chapter 2: First Meeting

Brother Wolf gets up with the sun, his silver fur glistening in the light. He raises his head and lets out a long howl, the sound reverberating in the sky. I follow suit and let out a long howl, raising my hands high towards the sky, like I'm embracing the sun and embracing the new day. The birds all take flight into the dancing clouds. I laugh and kick Brother Wolf, "Race ya to the banks of the Yue Ya Spring", taking off before my howls have even fallen.

In three years time, Brother Wolf is as tall as my waist. I call him (elder) Brother Wolf not because he's older than me, it's just what I decided to call him. When I rejoined the pack, he was just one year old and learning to hunt. But now he is the Leader of the wolf pack. Even though I constantly kick him when we are alone, but deep down I do respect him.

Brother Wolf sensed I was deep in thought. He bent down to drink and let out a few humphs. He sees himself as the world's most handsome, most powerful specimen – the male wolves all bow to him and the female wolves all faint at the sight of him. Except when it comes to me. I don't cower before him, which is sad for him. Perhaps he wonders why he was born in the same world as me.

To help identify the wolves, I once tried to name them numerically. Wolf 1, wolf 2, wolf 3, all the way to wolf 99 when I first arrived. But following Brother Wolf and my vast conquering strategy, I've totally lost track, with the last count I kept being wolf 19,999. And that was two years ago already. When I see a wolf and can't remember its name, I decided to give up. One day Brother Wolf and I will surely conquer all the wolves. But not having a wolf's keen sense of smell, it's hard for me to remember all the wolf faces.

Would Papa be happy or sad to know that I'm using all the knowledge he taught me to conquer the wolves. If I had learned more and understood it all earlier, maybe I could have helped him, and things might be different today.

I start humming a ditty but Brother Wolf gives me a dirty look before closing his eyes. Like I don't think he's all that, he also never thought I was pretty. Compared to the glowing fur of the female wolves, I'm likely so ugly it hurts his eyes.

I glare at him back and continue to braid my hair and hum my tune. Looking at my reflection in the water, in three years time I've transformed from Papa's ugly little girl into a pretty young lady. Perhaps I can't call myself a lady, but I know I am beautiful. I made a face at my own reflection and nod my head in satisfaction. I let out a whistle to let Brother Wolf know we can set out. He gets up and we slowly jog off.

We are on the plateau of the Ming Sa Mountains, staring down at a traveling caravan getting ready to set up camp. Thinking of my remaining little bit of salt and my tattered skirt, I crouched down and smile seductively at Brother Wolf. He's unaffected by my attempt to entrance him, looking more like he's seen a monster. He takes a few steps back and furrows his brows and frowns. He shoots me a few sneers.

I growl low and soft to him, asking him to go back first. I plan to sneak into the caravan. He stares and indicates he wants to come along. I hug his neck and he closes his eyes, enduring my embrace. Since being without Papa, there is no one to hug me. But luckily I have Brother Wolf, who allows me to hug him even if he can't hug me.

We two sneak into the caravan camp. It's a small caravan with at most 10 people. I've never seen such a small caravan, leading me to wonder what their business could be. My delay due to pondering this caused the impatient Brother Wolf to nip me in the butt. I turn in angry embarrassment and pinch his ear. He realized I was genuinely angry and cocked his head, eyes wide in confusion. I let out a resigned sigh. The great and awesome King of the Wolves is here with me skulking about, so I'll be the bigger person and let this one go. I warn him sternly not to touch my butt, or else I won't let him eat roast meat. I return to scoping out the caravan.

A large black-robed Han man takes out a wheelchair. Another purple-robed man opens the door to a carriage, letting a flash of white hit my eyes.

The white is not blinding like the snow, but is instead very warm and soft, akin to shading the yellow Autumn moonlight with a touch of white. A young man's face becomes visible. His features are as clear as surface of a calm river, his form elegant like the magnolia tree. He sat there quietly but I felt like a brilliant moon had passed over the Sky Mountain and a spring breeze blew through the desert.

Transferring between the carriage and the wheelchair, the young man almost tumbled when the wheel slipped in the desert sand, but he stabilized the wheel and got on safely. The black-robed man shot others a glance so no one offered to help. What was normally a quick move took the young man a few minutes, but he remained smiling. Despite almost falling, his actions were elegant to behold, letting off an aura that he's not going to give up.

He looked up at the mountains and the nearby spring, both of which have remained standing in this desert despite the passage of thousands of years of time. The views I see everyday suddenly feels calmed by the addition of his white-robe. I guess even the vistas can be lonely.

I was staring so intently at him that I nearly forgot my purpose. I jolted myself with a reminder, followed by doubt about whether I should steal or not. I decided there was no reason not to steal, plus this young man will surely attract everyone's attention, giving me a prime opportunity.

The black-robed and purple-robed men are like twin towers standing behind the young man. Others hurried around setting up camp. I gestured for Brother Wolf to stay as I snuck over to the camels. I wanted to see what they were selling to decide if I needed anything. The salt I will have to wait until they start cooking to discover where it's being kept.

The caravans in the Gobi Desert always use camels and I'm already used to being around them. I've never failed before with the stealth tactics I learned in the wolf pack. But I had forgotten about the horse used to pull the carriage, which had been released from the harness and was off eating grass. As I snuck near the camels, the horse suddenly let out a whine. I couldn't believe this horse knew strategy, as it allowed the enemy to get

close before alerting to its presence.

The two big men rushed to protect the young man while others surrounded me. I glared at the horse, which appeared to be amused. I decided to settle my score with it later and try to escape first. I rushed away when Brother Wolf suddenly appeared and blocked two big men from chasing me.

As Brother Wolf and I ran away, suddenly a gentle lazy drawl rose from behind me “If the young miss is sure she can outrun my cocked bow with seven consecutive arrows, then go ahead and try.”

I slowed and stopped for a few steps, while Brother Wolf ran back and growled low at me. He didn’t know the danger we were in. I furrowed my brows to indicate the he should run away. I turned to protect him.

The young man, holding an intricate small bow, lowered it when he saw me stop and turn. The purple-robed man pointed to the wolf logo branded on every camel and said “Are you blind or a courageous idiot? Daring to set upon us? Even the desert thieves stay far far away from from us.”

Brother Wolf had turned agitated because I wouldn’t leave. He jumped in front of me and held a vicious attack pose, ready to strike at any moment. They realized Brother Wolf was a genuine wolf and not a wolf dog, raising their alarm since wolves travel in packs. A pack of wolves can decimate any caravan. Too bad I was rash and decided to sneak in with just Brother Wolf in tow, with the rest of the wolf pack too far away to arrive in time even if called.

The young man raised his bow towards Brother Wolf, but his eyes remained fixed on me. I scrambled in front of Brother Wolf “Please don’t....hurt him, it’s me.....it’s my idea to steal from you.....not him.” Since returning the pack, other than overhearing people talking in caravans, its been three years since I spoke with a human. I talked constantly to Brother Wolf, but perhaps I was nervous, because my words now come out in a stutter.

The young man gently asked “Just one wolf?” I thought with annoyance – if it was more than one, would I allow you to ask me all these questions. I quickly decided whether to lie or tell the truth, but recognizing that he didn’t appear easily lied to. My feminine instinct indicated that he already knew the truth, and just wanted reassurance for the people around him.

“Just.....this one.” My words relaxed everyone, who turned to look curiously at us, wondering how I could be companions with a wolf. The young man put down his bow and told me to control my wolf. I nodded and indicated to Brother Wolf to wait for my signal to attack. I asked the young man “So which arm are you going to cut off now?” I once overheard travelers discussing how they would cut off the arm of a thief as a warning.

The purple-robed man asked what I wanted to steal? I looked at my tattered skirt, compared to the exquisite clothes on the white-robed young man, and muttered “I want.....I want....a skirt.” The purple-robed man asked disbelievingly if that was all. I added that I also wanted salt. He humphed, promising ways to get me to tell the truth.

The young man cut him off “Please go bring the outfit that was given as a present. Then take out what salt we need for today, and give the rest of her.” The purple-robed man’s expression changed “Jiu Ye.....” [Ye is an honorific to mean lord, master, or sire – Jiu Ye thus means 9th Master.] He quieted once the young man gave him a look. Soon a man brought out a light blue outfit and handed it to me. I dumbly received it, and also accepted a small can of salt. I stared at the young man.

He smiled lightly and said “We are all men in this group, without any female clothing, except for this one. When we passed through Luo Lan, a friend gave it to me. I hope you like it.” I touched the fabric, which was as soft as a lambskin. This must be expensive silk, and knowing how precious this gift was, I ought to decline it. But I couldn’t and nodded my head sheepishly in accepting it.

He told me to leave. I paused and gave him a bow before taking off with Brother Wolf. A horse whine from behind caused me to turn back and

glare at that horse. But I had accepted something, whereas Brother Wolf could care less about niceties. He turned back and let out a howl. The camels all collapsed, and while the horse didn't collapse, it was quite nervous.

I let out a happy laugh. Without teaching it a lesson, the horse would believe it was a king of the desert. Brother Wolf leads tens of thousand of wolves, how dare the horse try to outsmart us. Perhaps it was the sound of my unbridled laughter, but the young man stopped and stared at me. His stare caused me to turn red and I quickly stopped laughing. He also quickly averted his gaze. He teasingly looked at Brother Wolf "This horse might not be a prize winner, but it was handpicked as a solid steed. Supposedly it can battle leopards and tigers, but perhaps that was just a baseless boast."

I respond "Perhaps it's not a baseless boast. The average leopard and tiger can't even compete with my Brother Wolf." I finish talking and hurry Brother Wolf away with me. He was staring at that solid steed with a tasty expression. If we don't leave now, who knows what new mess will arise.

We walked far before I turned back to look. In the distance the white robe became an unforgettable sight in this desert. Regardless of whether he could still see me, I heartily waved goodbye before entering the mountains.

It's only Brother Wolf and I next to the fire, the other wolves being afraid of the flames. Brother Wolf used to be afraid but I trained him to get used to it. The other wolves didn't have the courage. My forcing the other wolves to get used to the fire only added to my terrible reputation amongst the wolf pack. I became the spooky warning mother wolves told their recalcitrant baby wolves who wouldn't go to sleep at night. Hearing that they might be handed over to me, even the brattiest baby wolves dutifully did as they were told.

I opened the skirt, marveling at the dye used to get this magical blue color. The workmanship was exquisite, with intricate clouds embroidered on the sleeves. There is a sash draped with little seed pearls. Wearing it and walking, the sash and pearls will show off the elegant turn of the waist. The Luo Lan females must always wear a veil year round, so this outfit came

with an accompanying blue face veil and a pearl band to secure the veil on the head. At home when the veil is not needed, it can be lifted behind the head and create another new look, with the black hair a contrast to the pearl band and the blue veil.

I ask Brother Wolf “Isn’t this skirt too expensive a present? Why did that Jiu Ye give such a gift to a stranger? All these years and I haven’t changed my inability to turn down pretty things....” Used to my nattering, Brother Wolf had already closed his eyes and gone to sleep.

I pinched his ears but he didn’t stir. I stop my grouching and curled up next to him, drifting off into deep slumber.

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Another full moon night has arrived. I always wondered why wolves howl when it’s the full moon, which usually scares the living daylights out of desert travelers hearing the reverberating howling of the wolves. Under the blue-black night sky, the moon shines like water on the endless desert waves, bathing it in silver white light. I’m wearing my most precious blue skirt and ambling alongside Brother Wife.

The blue skirt hem moves with my footsteps, up and down, and the veil secured by the pearl head band billows in the wind. I take off my shoes to feel the still vaguely warm sand. The warmth seeps through my feet into my heart. Watching the endless horizon, I sudden have this sensation that the world belongs to me. I can extend my wings and be free here. I face the moon and let out a howl, and Brother Wolf immediately joins me. From the distance countless wolves start howling as well.

I think I finally understand why wolves howl at the moon. The moon belongs to us, the desert belongs to us, loneliness and arrogance and sadness, it all is released in the long howl towards the moon.

Brother Wolf and I find a resting stop high up. He plops down and surveys the entire desert. This belongs to him, he is the King of this

domain. Even though I've a bellyful of wistful thoughts, I don't want to disturb him right now. I sit down behind him and look up to enjoy the moon.

Brother Wolf suddenly lets out a low growl. I look towards the distance but my eyes and ears are not sharp like his. From what I see it is still just calm in the desert.

After some time, I gradually hear a sound approaching in the night air. It's coming closer, like a thousand horses thundering. Brother Wolf scoffs at me, indicating it's not that many people. More time later, I can gradually make out a small caravan of ten or so people in the front with about one or two hundred riders in pursuit. It doesn't look like an army, so it must be a band of thieves.

Brother Wolf looks annoyed these people disturbed his placid desert, but he lowers his head, not wanting to fight or get involved. The wolves have their wolf code, one of which is not attacking humans unless there is a dire necessity due to a food shortage or for self defense. Not because wolves are scared, but just to avoid more trouble.

I put on my shoes and fix my veil. Supposedly once the thieves set their sights on a caravan they are relentless. This battle outcome is obvious, especially with the number differential. Two caravan riders have already been cut down, their bodies trampled by horses that continue to pursue the rest.

Suddenly a horse is cut by a thief and the rider falls to the ground. Another rider turns back and pulls the fallen rider on the same horse and continues on with the speed now slowed down considerably. The fallen rider tries to get off, but the rescuing rider looks annoyed and chops the fallen rider's neck with his hand, causing the fallen rider to go limp on the horse.

My eyes seem to be clouded by a veil of blood lust, and my nostrils seem to smell the sweet wetness of blood. Three years ago, the thundering sound of hooves, once again returns to my ears. I can't help but stand up

and blankly stare down.

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Yu Dan and I are riding the most powerful horse in the entire Xiong Nu. After riding for two days and two nights, we still haven't reached the Han dynasty or shaken the pursuers. Yu Dan's guards slowly die one by one, until it's just the two of us left. I'm afraid I will soon fall off the horse, not sure if it will hurt to be trampled under their hooves. Yi Zhi Xie, do you really want to kill Papa and us? If you kill Papa, I will hate you forever.

"Yu Jin, I am going to prick the horse flank with this knife and it will have a burst of speed. Once I shake the pursuing army, I will let you off the horse and you escape alone. When you were a child, didn't you live in this desert like a wolf? You need to become a wolf again, you need to escape from the hunters behind us."

"What about you? Papa told us to escape to the Central Plains together."

"I have a horse! I can run faster than you. After I reach the Central Plains, I will come back for you." Yu Dan smiles his usual broad smile. I look at his smiling face and suddenly become afraid. I keep shaking my head no.

Yu Dan forces me off the horse. I chase behind him in the desert, crying and wailing loudly "Please don't leave me behind. Let's escape together." Yu Dan turns back and begs me "Yu Jin, please just let listen to me this once. Just listen to me one time. I promise to come back and retrieve you. So please start running away!"

I stare at him for a second before taking a deep breath and nodding my head vigorously. I turn and start running like crazy. Behind me Yu Dan turns his horse in the opposite direction. Turning around, under the moonlit darkness, the distance between us increases. He turns around to look at me, smiling as he waves at me. In the end we disappear separately into the

darkness of the desert.

All I remember is that the horse ran very fast. But I forgot that the horse had already been running for two days and two nights, and was also bleeding. How long can it last? Plus the scent of the blood would lure those chasing after us to continue pursuing him, unaware that I had already run off alone.

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The thieves appear to enjoy this game, not attacking directly but circling the caravan and enclosing everyone. Seeing this, I made a sudden decision. This time I would change the fates. I shoot Brother Wolf a look and let out a howl into the distance. Brother Wolf got up and shook himself off and then let out a howl towards his pack.

Suddenly howls arose everywhere as wolves began to appear one by one. More and more appear until their eyes in the darkness appear to be the lights leading the way to hell. Not sure which ethnicity the thieves are, but I don't understand their language. They quickly stop encircling the caravan and gather together to look for a way out. But the wolves have surrounded everyone. The wolves look at them, with the thieves unwilling to attack knowing the relentless battle to come.

The caravan group also assembles, and even though the numbers are small, it's clear they have a strong desire to survive. I start to suspect my initial assessment. Facing deadly thieves and fierce wolves, how can a regular caravan of merchants gather together so efficiently?

The howling has stopped and the thieves have also fallen silent. In the silence, there is irony, knowing that the hunter thieves have so quickly become the prey. They are probably thinking about using fire, but there are no kindling nearby.

The thieves are about to light a fire when I pat Brother Wolf on the back. "Looks like they don't want to kill anyone anymore. Let the pack

open a path for them to leave.” Brother Wolf puts on his most powerful stance and orders the pack to clear a path.

Initially in the confusion no one saw us standing up high, but when Brother Wolf let out a howl to order the pack, everyone turned towards us. Brother Wolf boldly walked forward until he was standing at the ledge and looking down on everyone. His proud stance, with his glittering silver fur, gave off a powerful aura.

I angrily kick him, knowing how he loves to show off. Ay, who knows how many female wolves’ hearts will be broken right here tonight.

The pack has already opened a path but the thieves remain rooted to their spots, staring at us and then at the pack. I got impatient and yelled in Han language “Already gave you a chance to live, why haven’t you taken it and left?” The thieves are silent for a moment and then let out a whoop, getting off their horses and bowing down to us on their knees. I realize the thieves are both afraid of the wolves but also in awe of the wolves’ prowess. The thieves get back on their horses and follow the path to leave.

After the dust settled, I howl towards the wolf pack, telling them to disperse and keep doing whatever they were doing. They don’t respect me like they do Brother Wolf, so they humph at me and bare their teeth a bit before dispersing. To a human’s ears, it was probably a lot of randomly howling.

I look at the caravan and have no desire to converse with them. I signal Brother Wolf and we get off the cliff and take off. Suddenly I hear horse hooves behind me “Thank you, young lady, for saving our lives.” I nodded my head but kept on running, hoping to lose them.

“Young lady, please wait! After being pursued by the thieves, we’ve lost our way. Can you give us directions?”

Hearing this, I ask Brother Wolf to stop and turn to face them. Their horses refuse to get closer when Brother Wolf is here. I walk forward and

they quickly get off their horses. With my Luo Lan outfit, they perform a Luo Lan formality towards me, asking me in Luo Lan language how I am doing. I take off my veil "I'm wearing a Luo Lan outfit but I am not a Luo Lan citizen. I also don't understand their language."

A man asked "You are a Han" I thought about it. Am I? Papa said his daughter must be a Han person, so I supposed I am a Han. I nod my head.

A voice spoke up from the back "We are spice merchants from Chang An. May I ask where, young lady, you are from?" Looking towards him, I recognize that he was the person who did the saving (turning the horse around to rescue the fallen rider).

To my surprise, he turned out to be a young man of sixteen or seventeen. His physique is as straight as a reed, with a strong masculine aura. Sharp eyebrows followed by dark eyes that shine like the stars are currently studying me. He smiles, with an expression like he doesn't have a worry in this world. I avoid his piercing gaze and look at the ground.

He can sense my discomfort, but he continues to just stare at me without a care. A middle aged man next to him steps up and laughs "Our utmost gratitude to you. Young lady, with your rich attire and uncommon presence, normally we ought not offer shallow material gifts, but we happen to have a pair of pearl earrings that would be a great complement to your outfit. If you don't mind." He puts a box before me.

I shake my head "I have no use for this. If you have any female clothes, I could use a set." The men turn and give each other looks. "If you don't have any, that's fine. Where do you want to go?" The middle aged man spoke "We want to go to Dun Huang city, and from there return to Chang An." I inform them "From here until the Min Sa Mountain Yue Ya Spring is a four day trip. I will lead you only to there."

Everyone looks concerned and worried, with the exception of the young man, who continues to look at me with a self-satisfied half smile on his face. The middle aged man explained that they lost most of their provisions, so their supply might not last until reaching the Yue Ya Spring.

I explained my estimate was my travel time. Since they have horses, we can cut down one or two days time. Everyone looks relieved.

They decide to rest now and eat, replenishing their energy after being chased by thieves for a day and a night. They ask my opinion. "I spend all day wandering this desert. I have nothing to do, so do what you wish." I secretly was shocked at how this small band of people were chased by thieves for one day and one night. If the thieves weren't more familiar with the terrain, who knows which party will be victorious.

I ordered Brother Wolf to leave, but make sure a few small wolves trail me. He didn't understand my weird relationship with humans, so he just licked my hand before bounding away.

The caravan takes out food and water, while I sit a distance away, wrapping my arms around my knees on the sandy dune. There are many people, but an awkward silence pervades. I can sense they are not an ordinary merchant caravan, but that has nothing to do with me. I care not to probe into who they really are. Plus they are slightly apprehensive about me, not sure if it's because I am with the wolves, or because my identity is suspicious. I'm wearing a lavish Luo Lan outfit, appearing in the Xi Yu desert but claiming to be a Han person, without any explanation of where I came from.

The man who wanted to give me the earrings walked over and offered me a biscuit. The delicious scent caused my mouth to water and I shyly accepted it and thanked him.

He laughed "It is us who need to thank you. You can call me Uncle Chen." He pointed around and started introducing everyone. When he finished introducing everyone except one, he looked toward the silent young man sitting before us, who didn't speak immediately. I shot him a wary look and he gave a small smile and said "Call me Xiao Huo."

I saw everyone smiling and staring at me. "My name is Yu.....Jin Yu. You can call me Ah Yu." Other than running into Jiu Ye near the Yue Ya Spring, this is the only other time in three years I've interacted with

humans. As my name was coming out, I decided to give myself a new one. From now on, there is no Yu Jin, there is only Jin Yu.

After resting, the caravan readies to leave. They let two smaller people ride one horse and give one to me. “I don’t know how to ride a horse.” Everyone looks at me until Xiao Huo speaks up “You can ride with me!” After he said that, everyone looks at me in alarm.

I hesitate, and then nodded my head. Everyone’s worried look disappears, but they shoot me apologetic looks. Even though the people of the Xi Yu region are more open, an unfamiliar man and woman sharing a horse is still rare. Xiao Huo appears to be fine with it, only smiling at me and bowing “Thank you, Ms Jin Yu!”

After Xiao Huo gets on the horse, he pulls me up. As I hold his hand, I think to myself that this is a hand that holds a sword and whip on a daily basis, with deep callous. From it comes a sense of strength and determination, and from where his callous is, this man must have practiced archery for many years. Sitting behind him on the horse, our bodies are ramrod straight. Others looking at us know they can’t hurry us along, so the pace progresses slowly.

Xiao Huo finally spoke up “We can’t be like this. If I shift the horse, you’ll fall down for sure.” Even though his words appear casual, his voice with a hint of nervousness betrays him. I secretly smile and my awkwardness turns into teasing him for being not as sure of himself as he appears. I shift a little and reach out to grab his clothes. “This will do.”

He immediately urged his horse into a gallop and so did everyone else. After awhile, he suddenly mumbled in a low voice “You’ll have to think of another way. If you keep tugging on my clothes, I will enter Dun Huang city with my arms bare.”

I actually already realized that I was tugging his clothes down, and purposely wanted to see what he would do about it. All I did was prepare for the possibility of falling off the horse. I tamped down the urge to laugh and said “Why do I have to think of a solution? Why can’t you think of

one?"

He laughs softly "I do have a solution, but if I say it, you'll think I'm taking advantage of you. Which is why I asked you for a solution."

I replied "I don't have any good ideas, so tell me yours. If it's good we'll do it, if not then you'll just end up with a bare arms!"

He didn't say a word, suddenly turning around and grabs my arms, wrapping it around his waist. I'm not comfortable on a horse so I don't dare make any big struggle. What he did forced my entire body forward until I was pressed completely against his back. With that, he was holding one of my arms while my other arm went around his waist. With the movement of the horse causing our bodies to be tightly pressed against each other, it was as intimate as could be.

My ears started to burn up. With embarrassment and outrage, I held his waist but straightened my body. "Is this how you Chang An people treat a person who rescued you?" He answered with annoyance "It's better than letting you fall off a horse." I can't find a proper retort so I just give a cold humph and sat there silently. But my anger continued to boil, so I tighten my arm to choke his waist. But he acted like there was nothing different, only purposefully urging the horse on. I thought to myself, this guy sure can endure pain. And after awhile, I felt bad and slowly released my hold on him.

Once again riding a horse with someone, my mind started to drift. Plus I didn't sleep last night, so like I did when I was small, I instinctively grabbed Xiao Huo's waist and rested my head against his back as I fall sleep. When I suddenly woke up, my face is burning hot and I immediately straighten my body and want to let go of him. He can sense my intention, only holding down my arm even more firmly "Be careful and don't fall down." I force my embarrassment away and pretended nothing is wrong, slowing letting go of his waist. But inside I feel this inexplicable feeling.

After a day of hard riding, we stop for a rest. Xiao Huo sees me with my head lowered and not talking. He walks over and sits down next to me.

He smiles “I see that you are a very perceptive person, so why do you trust me so much? Aren’t you worried I would sell you?”

My face turns red again and I glare at him. I get up and move elsewhere to sit down. It is odd. I can tell their identities are suspect, but I have this gut feeling that he won’t harm me. This person’s proud arrogance means he wouldn’t do anything underhanded.

Xiao Huo brought some food over and sat down next to me again. He passed me some biscuits. I gave him a warning glance and silently accepted the food. The little bit of caution in his eyes also dissipate, leaving only a twinkling gaze.

Due to missing their homeland, the folks start discussing life in Chang An, painting it as wondrous and lavish. With wide clean streets, great artisans, bustling markets, talented scholars, seductive performers, courageous generals, elegant ladies, fragrant wine, and delicious food. The best of everything on earth can be found in Chang An. It’s like everything one could possibly want is right there.

I listen intently with conflicting emotions. That place feels familiar yet foreign. If I follow Papa’s wish, perhaps I would already be living there with Papa right now, and not wandering the Gobi Desert all alone.

When there are a lot of people, Xiao Huo doesn’t talk much. He just silently listens to everyone’s descriptions. Only when we are alone on the horse does he say to me “The Chang An they describe is the glittering side of it. Not everyone experiences the wonders they describe.” I indicated that I understood what he is trying to convey.

Two days later, we say our farewells at the Yue Ya Spring. I suddenly have a new idea. When they want to thank me again, I boldly ask them for money, as payment for leading them here. Xiao Huo stops for a moment and then smiles. He tossed a bag of coins to me. It looks like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. He finally tells me “Chang An is not like Xi Yu, you have to be careful.” I nodded and left with the bag of coins I earned in hand.

After walking a distance away, I finally give in and turn back around. I thought I would see a departing back, but to my surprise he didn't leave. He sat on the horse, watching me off from a distance. Our eyes met and his face registered the look of happy surprise. My heart thumped, and then I quickly turned my head and hurried off.

Since separating from Xiao Huo's caravan, I followed the wolf pack from the Gobi to the great grassy plains, and from the plains back to the desert. At night I would hold the pack of coins, lost in thought. I will miss Brother Wolf and the wolves, the yellow sandy desert, the verdant land and the Hu Yang Forest. But am I to spend the rest of my life living here with these wolves? Just like Papa said, I am a human, I cannot be a wolf anymore.

After much deliberation, I decided to leave. Brother Wolf's life will have peaks and valleys, with innumerable challenges in the future. Perhaps the largest wolf kingdom in the history of the Xi Yu territory awaits him. But my life is just starting. My chance to live was hard to come by. So no matter if the future holds sour or sweet, spicy or bitter, I decide to taste it. Just like those herding songs sing about, a precious blade needs sharpening and a great set of pipes need to keep singing. A life without any experience is sure to be dreary, like a night sky without any stars.

I want to go to Chang An, to see the Han dynasty Papa spoke so much about. Perhaps I can become the beautiful Han lady of Papa's dreams.

Chapter 3: Reunion

I paid money in Dun Huang city to travel with a caravan of merchants going to Chang An. With everything I own in hand, I got on a carriage. Though the only thing worth anything is my Luo Lan outfit. Papa told me a lot about Chang An, and I imagined it often, but I was still stunned by its majesty and grandeur. With tree-lined wide-streets and grand homes, the city was beautiful. I held my bag and wandered the streets, so thrilled that every corner and bridge would get me excited. I finally started to understand Papa's feelings. Seeing such rich surroundings from childhood makes it hard to fall in love with the simplicity of the tents, where everywhere you look there is only sheep or cows.

It was dusk before I realized I needed to find a place to rest. Counting my coins, I had enough for at most ten days at the cheapest inn where I was staying. I missed the days of not needing money in Xi Yu. Laying in the bed in the darkness, I was worried for a bit before laughing. Chang An is such a vast city, with so much to do that can sustain a livelihood. Am I any worse than anyone else? I have hands and feet, would I starve? I decided to stop lamenting the Heavens!

After walking through the city a total of three times, I started to doubt if I could earn a living. Maid or dancing girl, these require selling myself and I refuse to live a life controlled by others. I don't know embroidering or sewing, or any of the female skills. The worst is that I don't have a guarantor. A store almost hired me to do their books but once I couldn't produce a guarantor they didn't want to take the chance on me. I tried looking for Xiao Huo and his people, to be my guarantor. But everyone I asked, no one had heard of such spice merchants. I muttered a curse to Xiao Huo, who clearly lied to me.

A holiday is approaching and the stores are fragrantly decorated. I've used up all my coin and haven't eaten anything since yesterday, with nowhere to go tonight. I grab my things and head out of the city, to a nearby forest to bed down for the night. If I can start a fire, at least I'll be warm. If I'm lucky I can snare a rabbit and get some dinner. Being hungry feels terrible.

When I'm feeling down, I wonder if it was the right decision to come here. Should I sell my Luo Lan outfit and get enough money to return to the Xi Yu? But then I feel like I gave up. Papa wouldn't believe that the daughter he raised like a Han couldn't survive in Chang An. When I reached the forest, I discovered lots of people were thinking the same thing as me, with the ground crowded with beggars. I saw a tree and was about to settle in when a beggar yelled "You damn girl! Do you know any manners? That's your grandpa, my spot."

I glared at him. He didn't pee on the spot like a wolf, so how should I know. It was a mistake only, but I didn't want to make a scene. As I turned to leave, another beggar gave me a dark look, asking me to sing for him and he'll offer me a place to sleep next to him. I turn and am ready to pull out my dagger when suddenly another young beggar arrives bearing a jug of good fragrant wine. All the attention of the beggars turn to him and start drinking, forgetting about me.

An old beggar walks up "Little girl, in this lifetime, there are no pits you can't cross, and nothing you can't endure. They don't mean anything, so just let it go. If you don't mind, want to go warm yourself by the fire with an old beggar like me?" He takes out two buns and starts to warm it by the fire, and hands me a pot of wine to drink. I hesitate, explaining that we are strangers, so why he is so nice to me. That young beggar helping me back there, I was already so grateful.

His eyes twinkle and he explains that even the Emperor needs a Prime Minister to assist, and people endure situations and need help. I thank him and accept the wine and bun. Later than night, the young beggar tells me that if I go knock on doors asking to wash clothing, perhaps I can find work. I have the strength so I decide to try my luck tomorrow. I rush into the city at dawn, in such a hurry that it was late when I realized I left my bag at the beggar camp. But I figured it was safe with the old beggar and his grandson, and I had promised them I would go back tonight. The most important thing is finding a job.

Every door rejects me, until a nice lady explains that the houses all give their wash to familiar people. A burly man waves me away, explaining someone is already washing clothes for this house. I ask if they need other

work done, and a seductively made up woman walks out of that residence and overhears me. She looks me up and down and confirms that I am not a local. She compliments me on speaking the Chang An dialect with no accent. I truthfully reveal that I've been here almost half a month now, and I'm a fast learner.

She asks if I have relatives here and I shake my head. She invites me in to sweep the courtyard in exchange for some steamed buns. I happily accept, thanking the mistress. She tells me to call her Hong Gu, promising that if I did a good job, we might see each other more in the future. After I finish my chores, she compliments me on my quick hands. She brings out hot tea and steamed buns, which I shovel down since I've not eaten all morning. Hong Gu smiles and watches me. When I'm half full, I remember the old and young beggar. I ask Hong Gu if I can take the rest of the buns with me.

Hong Gu looked shocked and asked why? I explain that I wanted to save it to eat later. She smiled and offered me more tea as she has the buns packed up. I take a few sips of tea and suddenly don't feel right. My head starts spinning and my legs grow weak. I knew what had happened but acted like nothing was wrong. I got up "My grandpa is waiting for me to return. If the buns are ready, I'll be going now."

As I rushed out, two burly men stood at the front door. I pulled out my dagger but my body is already falling forward. Hong Gu stands by the door and smiles "If you're tired you can rest here. I'm sure there is no grandpa waiting for you, so why rush?"

The two men walk over and I try to stab them but they take away my dagger. I collapse on the ground, with the last thing I hear being Hong Gu "What a sharp little gal! After drinking the drug, it took her that long to collapse. Feed her more of it and make sure she's secured or else I'll have your hide!"

I don't know how long I've been unconscious, waking up to find myself not alone. Another girl is locked in the same room as me. She has a pretty face and an elegant demeanor. She hurries to bring me water now

that I am awake. I observe her but don't accept the water. Her eyes grow red rimmed "This water doesn't have any drug in it. It's not necessary anyways. It's well secured here, you can't escape."

I reply "I'm not thirsty", so she puts the water down and huddle against the other wall again. I move my limbs, which are all intact, but has no strength in them. Clearly they gave me yet another drug. After I clear my mind, I tell the girl "My name is Jin Yu, I was drugged by a woman named Hong Gu. What about you?" She replies "I am Fang Ru, my stepmother sold me here" and then starts crying. I have no patience to comfort her, only asking "Do you know where this place is? Why do they want me?" Fang Ru explains that this place is called Luo Yu Fang (Luo Yu House), one of more famous dancing parlors in Chang An city. I was captured probably because I am pretty.,

I don't know whether to be happy or sad. From a hairy wolf girl into a lovely young woman under Papa's tutelage, I've finally been acknowledged by outsiders, especially someone as seductive as Hong Gu. So it turns out that my beauty is enough to become a problem. But I never used my looks to harm anyone before, and it turns around and harms me first. I ask "Do they want me to prostitute myself?" Fang Ru shakes her head "This place is a house of dancing and performance, not a brothel. The girls here sell their talents, not their body. But even then, if there is someone very rich or powerful, you might not be able to refuse. You can only hope someone buys your freedom, or if you are so talented at dancing and performing, you'll have special status and can even enter the Palace."

I want to ask more when the door suddenly opens and the two burly men walk in. Fang Yu cries that she won't go. Hong Gu enters, muttering that Fang Ru has already tried many times to kill herself and been punished, she ought to just behave and get dressed to go learn song and dance with the other girls. She's dragged out, despite her frantically reaching for anything to grab onto. I watch this scene without blinking an eye. Hong Gu watches me and appears impressed "You ought to know where this place is by now. And yet you don't seem scared or shocked, you don't cry or make a scene. Have you given up, or planning something else?"

I remain silent for a moment before responding “Is being scared of any use? Is crying of any use? Will fear and tears cause you to release me? It’ll just earn me whipping or other punishments. The end result is the same. I’ll pick the less painful route and do as you want.”

Hong Gu is stunned for a moment, before sharing the anecdote about how people who drown really are close to shore and can even float if they stopped struggling, but they are so scared that their struggles end up dooming them. I look at Hong Gu and we reach a mutual understanding. She asks for my name. I tell her that I am Jin Yu. Hong Gu will prepare my own room, but before leaving, she states that it was my luck to run into her. If I became a beggar, with my looks, I would never escape the dangers on the street.

I learn to dance, sing, play the flute, embroider. The dancing is the easiest for me, since the Xiong Mu are passionate and love to dance. I’ve danced around the fire since I was a child thousands of times, and been taught by the Xiong Nu’s most esteemed court dance instructor. It’s the flute playing and embroidering that gives me a headache.

Not sure what other girls are thinking, but I’m really getting into this. I often practice when I’m alone, especially under the moonlight. Too bad I can’t even play a single tune completely, sounding more like a ghost wailing. But I’m pretty stoked, always thinking about how Brother Wolf might like this, and how I plan to play for him when there is a full moon.

The girls in the house complain often to Hong Gu, but she always takes my side. She even berates those who tattle on me, telling them to work even half as hard as me, they’d be famous all over Chang An. To be honest, I ought to despise Hong Gu, but I can’t seem to. She’s seductive and smart without being petty, and when she talks it’s clear she thinks deeply about things.

The days slip by until I can somewhat play the tune Bai To Ying. A new year is arriving, which means gathering with relatives. Even the most flirty man has to go home, so the usually busy dancing house becomes empty. In a house where no one has relatives, the girls decide to celebrate

the holidays with as much energy as possible. Even Hong Gu is the same, willing to spend hard earned money to decorate the house inside out with red. Even if it's garish, at least it's colorful and cheerful.

New Year's Eve, Hong Gu orders the house securely locked and summons all twenty some of us girls to the hall. She prepared food and wine and wants us all to eat, drink, and be merry. Whether out of sadness or joy, it doesn't matter, as everyone celebrates with gusto, drinking shot after shot proffered. I never had any tolerance, so after a few cups of gao liang wine, I was already dizzy and crawled over to the side to plop down. When I regained some sense, I felt like I couldn't breathe. Turned out Fang Ru was so drunk she mistook my chest for a pillow and was sleeping on it.

Looking around, everyone was collapsed all over the place, draped and propped on others. The room was warm and felt peaceful. I gently moved Fang Ru's head aside and gave her a pillow. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

As I was fixing my skirt, I looked out the window and saw Hong Gu bowing before two men, one older and one younger. They were asking her rapid fire questions, and I can hear bits and pieces ".....girl.....looks..... three months ago.....Boss....." I can't see Hong Gu's face but I can sense her shock. The two men walk in my direction and Hong Gu runs after them, yelling at us to all get up. The girls all start to get up, and I nudge the really drunk ones awake. The men enter and start surveying us.

The best singer in the house, Shuang Shuang, clearly recognizes them and gives a smiling bow "The first day of the new year and we have honored visitors. This means the house will surely have a smooth year. Shaung Er wishes Wu Ye a happy new year and good health."

Wu Ye's tight expression relaxes a bit, then tightens again as he nods at Shuang Shuang. I was hiding behind a beam, so when he finally spots me, his face changes and he quickly asks Hong Gu who I was and how long I had been here. Hong Gu turns white and doesn't answer, so Wu Ye demands the truth now. Hong Gu lowers her head and explains that I am from out of town and came to this house three months ago. Wu Ye asked

me if this is true and I confirm it is.

Wu Ye mutters that this ought to be correct – looks, timing, background, it all fits. He explains to Hong Gu that the Big Boss has been looking for me for the past two weeks. Because Wu Ye doesn't work directly for the Big Boss, he doesn't know why he's looking for me. He tells Hong Gu that whatever trouble she created, she'll have to deal with the consequences herself.

Hong Gu tells all the girls to leave except for me, and then she gets on her knees. I hurry to help her up “Hong Gu, please don't be afraid. I don't know that Wu Ye person, or the Big Boss he speaks of. But you just relax. There is no animosity between us. All I know is that you've fed, clothed, and housed me for the past few months, and taught me lots of fun new things.” I thought to myself, being new to Chang An, it's better to have one less enemy. Plus Hong Gu didn't actually cause me any hard. It's better to let it go in this case.

Hong Gu's eyes fill with tears and her voice becomes hard “Xiao Yu, thank you for having such a big heart. I won't say any useless crap now. I owe you one, and I will always remember it.” She takes out a pill and gave it to me. I swallow it and she explains that my strength will slowly return. But because I've been drugged for so long, it'll take a few days. I smile, willing to wait. She gratefully nods and takes out a cloth to wipe my face and fix my hair and skirt. She takes my hand and leads me outside. Wu Ye sees our joined hands and looks less stern, taking me away.

I ride in the same carriage as Hong Gu, still not sure what is happening, only knowing we are headed to meet someone who is looking for a person like me. This person appeared to be a very revered person in Chang An, because even one of his subordinates who is not close to him could get Shuang Shuang bowing in earnest and Hong Gu shaking in fear. “Hong Gu, who is this Big Boss that Wu Ye speaks of?” Hong Gu is shocked “You don't know the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises?”

I shake my head and Hong Gu is even more confused. “It's been years since the Big Boss asked about the little business dealings going on in

Chang An. The dancing house I run is owned by Shi Enterprises. Every year I have to remit my earnings to Shi Enterprises. In the past they used to micro-manage, but these last few years they've been hands off as long as we follow the rules." I ask what rules, and she sheepishly replies "Quite a few rules, such as, not to abduct or swindle an honest girl into this profession."

I laugh, knowing now why she's so scared, because she broke one of the rules. I assure her that I'm not going to say anything. Hong Gu quickly tries to explain "Once is enough, I'll never do it again. I was just impatient, wanting to become the most famous dancing house in Chang An, and needing talent to do it. Normally the girls have the looks but the not the smarts, or vice versa, so when I saw you, I got greedy and did something wrong. Afterwards I've been afraid of the Big Boss hearing about it, but it was already too late."

I can see that she is sincere and quickly change the topic, asking her to tell me more about this Shi Enterprises. Hong Gu explains "I don't know much because they are low key. I've lived in Chang An since I was a child, and have met plenty of people, but I've never met the Big Boss. Heard from elders that the enterprise started generations ago selling rock and stone, growing bigger and bigger until they owned almost half the businesses in this city. One day they suddenly stopped expanding the enterprise, letting go of some businesses and becoming more withdrawn. The past few years one rarely hears about them. If I didn't have to pay money to them every year, I would almost forget that the dance house belonged to the Shi Enterprises. Even if they are not as big as they once were, still no one in Chang An would dare cross them."

I thought – a mysterious merchant in Chang An who knows what I look like? My mind flashed to riding the horse with Xiao Huo. Could it be him? The carriage stopped outside a residence and we got out. An old man opened the door and welcomed us in, with Wu Ye and Hong Gu bowing respectfully to him. He checks me out and Wu Ye confirms that he believes I'm the one, and this entire time I've been right under their nose. The man doesn't know if I'm the one, but the two earlier were sent away moments after entering.

We sit in a small waiting room, and Wu Ye is even politely bowing to the little boy who brings us tea. The old man returns beaming, confirming that this time it's the right girl. He sends the other two away to await either reward or punishment from the Big Boss and gestures for me to follow him. Hong Gu indicates that I should go, plus I'm curious if this Big Boss is Xiao Huo or not, so I quickly follow.

After walking for awhile, suddenly the hallway fills with light and beyond the distance is a lake and a copse of trees, giving off a sense of energy and life. This house looks ordinary from the front, but surprisingly has such grandeur inside. Past the lake the scenery is so lively, even in this dead of Winter the trees still feel vibrant, causing my mood to lift.

The old man turns and notices me "If you like, come back and play next time. I also love this bamboo forest, cool in the Summer and lively in the Winter. This here is the Bamboo Residence, beyond the lake there is the Plum Blossom Garden, the Orchid Pavilion, and the Crysanthemum Suite." I nodded and ran to catch up to him.

At the end of the Bamboo Forest is a small courtyard and the old man indicates for me to enter alone. Inside are more bamboos with some pigeons resting on it. A blue-robed man is sitting there facing the sun, with a pigeon on his knee, a warming pot next to him. Seeing the steam from the pot surrounding him, it feels slightly like a dream. Whether in the desert or here in Chang An, wherever he is at, even the most ordinary of surroundings becomes something unforgettable.

Watching this scene, I don't dare make a sound, only turning my eyes to follow his gaze towards the sun. The Winter sun blinds me slightly so I squint, and when I look back at him, he's looking directly at me. He points to the chair next to him and smilingly asks "Is Chang An fun?"

One simple yet familiar question causes my heart to warm immediately, and all my bellyful of questions fall by the wayside. Those questions aren't important, what's important is that I've reunited with him here.

I easily sit down next to him “First thing I did was fill my stomach, and then later I just lolled about in Hong Gu’s house. I haven’t played anywhere yet!”

He gives a small crooked smile “I see you’re doing fine. Hong Gu has taught you well. If you walk out now, you actually have a few shades resembling a quality gently bred young lady.”

I remember how haggard I looked when I met him at the Yue Ya Spring, leaving me slightly angry and embarrassed “I’ve always been quality, it’s just that people need clothes like a horse needs a bridle.”

A little boy brought out a table and tea, and I notice it’s the young beggar from the forest, Go Wa Zi (Little Puppy). I’m happy to see him but he’s serious towards me “Call me Shi Feng, not Little Puppy. That was a name used when I was in dire straits.” I agreed and he explained that he was here because Jiu Ye brought him back. He left and Jiu Ye explained “Because Shi Feng’s grandpa fell ill, he had no choice but to sell the outfit you left with them. Luckily the owner of the pawn store was with me on that trip to Xi Yu and recognized it, conveying this to me. I saw how filial Xiao Feng was, and also bright, so kept him by my side.”

I nod, realizing this was how my situation in Chang An was discovered. I asked about his grandpa and was told age and weather laid him low, but with rest and medicine he will recover. When Jiu Ye asked if Hong Gu harmed me, I quickly said no. He laughed at my nervousness, and I explained that who knows what the punishment is like in Chang An. If people get arms cut off as punishment, it will be a waste of pretty Hong Gu.

Jiu Ye thought “This isn’t just between you and Hong Gu. If it’s not handled, who knows if other girls will suffer in the future.” I counter “Hong Gu has already promised me never to do it again. Is there a mutually beneficial solution?” Jiu Ye decides to let Wu Ye handle it since it’s under his purview, rather than waste time thinking about it now.

The Winter sun sets early and it’s starting to get cold. I look at his legs and say “I’m feeling cold.” He lets the pigeon fly off before turning his

wheelchair around, gesturing for me to go first. I want to assist but remember what happened in the desert so I quickly withdraw my hand. As we approach the door, it opens by itself, startling me. Jiu Ye explains there is a mechanism triggered by his wheelchair reaching the door which allows it to open.

Inside the residence, it's exquisitely appointed, with everything at the perfect height for someone in a wheelchair to access. He invites me to sit at the table with a snack on it, which reminds me that I haven't eaten all day, and my grumbling stomach gives my hunger away. He's making tea and turns to look at me, and I say in embarrassment "You never heard someone's stomach growl before? I'm hungry, can I eat the snack?" He instead orders dinner prepared, asking what I want.

I don't know how to order, but I want meat. Lots and lots of meat, and not diced into tiny little cubes or slivers like at Hong Gu's. He pulls a knob and Xiao Feng comes running in, getting the order for dinner. He put the tea pot on his thighs and wheels it over, not spilling anything. He pours me a cup and I take a sip while nibbling on a snack. He seemed happy, explaining he rarely has visitors, and this is the first time he's made tea for someone.

I nod "You must have a lot of siblings, right? Is there a Shi (10) Ye behind you?" [Jiu is the number 9] He softly answered "It's just me, even though father wanted a large family. Since I was small everyone called me Jiu Ye for luck, so it's stuck."

I swallow my bite "My family is me and a pack of wolves. The one you saw that day is just my younger brother (wolf)."

He smiled "I heard your name is Jin Yu?" I nod "And you?"

"Meng Xi Mo." I was shocked "Your last name is not Shi? But you are the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises?" He asked "Who told you the owner of the Shi Enterprises has the last name Shi?"

I stuck my tongue out “I saw the residence here is called Shi Estate, that’s why. Xi Mo. Xi (West) Mo (Desert), the Western part of the desert. Your name doesn’t sound like a Central Plains name.”

He counters “Your name is Jin (Gold) Yu (Jade). I don’t see you draped in jewels and riches.”

I smile “Not now, but someday I will be.”

Xiao Feng brings in a platter of food and seeing how excited I am, he tells me to dig in first since he’s not hungry. I devour just the meat and ignore the vegetables, so he comes over and pushes it back towards me. “Eat some vegetables.” I ignore the veggies still. He said again “Girls need to eat more vegetables to be pretty.” I looked alarmed, was he joking or telling the truth? He looked serious, so wavering between delicious food and beauty, I finally picked up the vegetables. He smiled and looked out the window.

Eating is always a happy thing, and I hold my full stomach and feel like life is but as happy as now.

I decide to be ballsy and tell Jiu Ye to take responsibility for me since he’s caused so much commotion Hong Gu will surely not take me back anymore. He just smiles at me but doesn’t respond. I explain I can write, count, is strong and not stupid. Surely he can use me at one of the businesses to help in a shop. He asks if I want to stay in Chang An? For now I do, not sure when I’ll leave one day.

He lets me stay here while deciding what suits me to do. He tells me to think about what I like to do. I won’t stay here without earning it, promising to do whatever Xiao Feng does to earn my keep. He shakes his head, calling me his guest....a reunited old friend.

In a few days I’ve learned my way around the Shi Residence, seeing the black-robed and purple-robed man from the Yue Ya Spring. One is called Shi Jing Yen (Careful Words) and one is called Shi Sheng Xing

(Cautious Actions). I smile at how apropos one name is, and how not suitable the other name is.

Hearing I'm staying in the Bamboo Residence, Jing Yen is shocked since Jiu Ye loves his solitude and even Xiao Feng and those folks don't spend the night there. Those two, plus the Shi Enterprises Manager Shi Tian Cao, together oversee all the Shi businesses. They come every morning to report to Jiu Ye, and the little porter boys all eavesdrop. It's cute their names are Feng (Wind), Yu (Rain), Lei (Thunder), and Dian (Lightning), which is easy to remember. I always leave to avoid hearing anything. Today I decide to visit Hong Gu because I miss her.

Shi Buo (the old man butler) worries I'm wearing too little on a snowy day, and I tell him I'm afraid of only being hungry, this cold doesn't faze me. The snow has stopped but the wind and the carriage wheels whips the fallen snow all around, with most people walking huddling to stay warm. I order the carriage to slow and not throw more snow on people.

I return to the Luo Yu House and find the red lanterns are gone, hearing people exclaim that the House hasn't opened for business in days. Hong Gu welcomes me, explaining that her mistake is leaving Wu Ye deciding what to do. She's so worried and has decided not to open for business in the meantime. I explain that Wu Ye wants to help her, which is why he's racking his brains for a good solution. Hong Gu thanks me for protecting her.

She's curious about the Big Boss but I tell her to worry about her situation and stop asking about non pertinent matters. She smiles, knowing I don't want to answer, so she doesn't push. But she wants to know why the Big Boss was looking for me. I explain we've met before, thought I didn't know that he was in Chang An. Hong Gu says "People can't avoid fate."

A maid comes and informs us that Shuang Shuang, the number one singer, has decided to jump ship and go work for Tian Xian House since this place isn't doing business. Hong Gu explains that Tian Xian House used to also be owned by Shi Enterprises, but not anymore. And recently it keeps growing bigger and more well known. Perhaps soon Chang An's

dancing houses will all be consolidated into one.

She doesn't want to talk about these business worries now. Since the business is shuttered, she takes all the girls out to go flower watching. Everyone bundles up in layers except for me, leaving Hong Gu admiring not my fortitude, but how it allows me to still look feminine when they are all wrapped into bundles.

As the carriage nears the city gates, suddenly everyone parts and our carriage also pulls over. I stick my head out, curious. Hong Gu says this is nothing compared to when the Emperor passes through. I look and from far away, a few young men in horses are riding down the lane. All are strapping, dressed in fine clothes, dashing on the horse – clearly young men with bright futures and riches, having been given the largesse of the world.

My heart is suddenly in shock. That.....that stone-faced, handsome man....isn't that Xiao Huo? Even though his attire and demeanor is vastly different from back in the desert, I'm sure that I didn't make a mistake. The other young men are all happily chatting on their horses, while his lips are tightly closed and his eyes stare into the distance. It's clear that while he's physically here, his heart isn't here.

Hong Gu notices my expression and worriedly asks what's wrong. I point to Xiao Huo "Who is that?"

She smiles at me "Yu Er, you sure don't have ordinary taste (in men). All these young men are high born, but he's the most extraordinary amongst them. Plus he still hasn't married yet, and hasn't gotten engaged."

I glare at her "Hong Gu, you entered the wrong profession, you ought to have been a matchmaker." She smiles and explains "His aunt is the current Empress, his uncle is the officially titled Great General, with a reputation that thunders through Xiong Nu and Xi Yu, with wealth to equal 8,000 homes. His name is Huo Qu Bing and he is Chang An's most famous young Lord. To others he's taciturn and rarely has any emotion, but supposedly he's got quite a temper and is exceedingly proud. He even dares to talk back to his uncle in public. But somehow the Emperor totally gets

along with him, and cuts him quite a lot of slack. This means not a single person in Chang An dares to piss him off.”

I stare at him on the horse and I can’t describe the feeling in my heart. In Chang An, when I was at my most down, I wanted to find him. But I didn’t find him. When I entered the Shi Estate and was walking through the long corridors, I thought the person on the other side would be him, but it wasn’t. Just when I was least expecting it, he appeared. I already suspected he was not someone common, but I never could have imagined that he would be the nephew to both the current Han Emperor and the Great General’.

He seemed to sense something and turned in my direction, so I quickly released the blinds in the carriage. Hong Gu just smiled at me and didn’t press on. But later she quietly said “Don’t underestimate yourself. You are young, and are so pretty, if you have the heart, there is nothing you can’t get in Chang An. Take the current Empress Wei, she wasn’t born much higher in status than we were. Her mom was a maid serving the princess, and had her out of wedlock. She didn’t have a father, and when she grew up became a dancing girl in the household of the princess. Based on her extraordinary looks, she landed the Emperor and become the Mother to the Han people. Take also the Great General Wei. He was also a bastard born, with a hungry childhood. He only earned this position by conquering the Xiong Nu.”

I cuddle next to her, assuring her that I was just thinking through some things, though I understand her point. I give her a proverb that causes her to stop and think, wishing she understood this concept when she was young and didn’t have to end up here. Even though Hong Gu is pretty, she is past her prime. The scenery outside is pretty but we are both not fully appreciating it. The trip ends and I return to the Shi Estate.

I walk into the Bamboo Residence to find Jiu Ye reading alone under the flickering oil light. Seeing this, my eyes suddenly feel teary, remembering how Papa would wait for me late into the night, for me to return after a crazy day of playing outside. He would read a book and sit there to wait for me. One lamp, one person, and that was what warmth was.

I stood at the door in silence, letting the warmth of the room flow into my heart. My heart, which had been uncomfortable all afternoon, gradually became at ease. He sensed me and smiled to welcome me back. I told him I went to visit Hong Gu and then we took a short day trip out.

He gently asks if I've eaten and I confirm Hong Gu brought snacks and I ate along the way. I ask him directly why he lets the dancing houses owned by the Shi Enterprises compete with each other rather than letting them collaborate. People will think he has no ability to manage. Jiu Ye responds that he doesn't have the ability to manage. I think for a moment and ask him "Didn't you tell me to do what I wanted? I want to keep learning at the dancing house. Whether as a maid or keep the accounts." He smiles and agrees. I bow and thank him.

He turns his wheelchair and then hands me a package "Returning this to its rightful owner."

The package contains the Luo Lan outfit. As my hand grazes over it, I don't know what to say. This is not something a simple thank you can convey.

Chapter 4: Beauty

When the carriage returns to Luo Yu House, my position has greatly changed. I am returning as the new head of this business. I was assured Hong Gu would be fine with it, and indeed she was, pleased that she was not punished and could still enjoy her life and run the house with me. She handed me the books for the last few years, and confirmed that the best girls have indeed left. In truth, she was happy I came, someone to bear the heavy burden with her. And with my friendship with the Big Boss, I would be a good mountain for her to lean on.

I understood now why Wu Ye allowed me to be the new head, hoping I can turn the fortunes of this dance hall around not because I have the capability, but because I had the connections with Jiu Ye. I was told that Fang Ru has the potential but she didn't have the heart to do this. I called for her to be brought to me. I told Hong Gu not to worry, these things take time. We can train the girls, but it's luck to find a true star with talent and beauty. We might want to build up our reputation outside first with fresh new tactics, and then the talent will come to us.

I told her it was up to the two of us to think up new ideas, suggesting we take a tour of all the dance houses and she tell me what their specialties are. When Fang Ru arrived, I told her that I was giving her back her sale contract and she was free to leave. She looked shocked and grateful. I told her to come to me if she needed anything since I saw her as a friend. She ran off so quickly Hong Gu remarked that she's never seen Fang Ru move that fast in this house before. I tell her there is a chance Fang Ru may return of her own accord, and we need to take it because forcing her to stay she will never put her heart in it.

I've paid off Fang Ru's debt and the money will be docked from my earnings, which makes me laugh, to incur debt on this job before I even take on any responsibility. Hong Gu doesn't know if I'm hurting in my wallet right now, but she knows I'll be hurting elsewhere soon. She stares my ears until I back away. Hong Gu says "It's not my fault. You got out but then you chose to come back willingly. From now on you will be the face of this business, you have to look the part."

I remember legends of the past who have sacrificed, whereas I am merely sacrificing my ears. When I return to the Bamboo Residence, I peek in the mirror and realize how ugly I look right now. I touch my ears and sigh. Papa didn't want me to become a flower, yet I become the head of a bunch of flowers. But if what I am doing can alleviate some of the worry in Jiu Ye's furrowed brows, then everything will be worth it. If back then I had this level of thoughtfulness, perhaps I could have helped Papa think up great plans, then things would not have.....

I shake my head and tell the me in the mirror "Don't chase after the dead. You already spent more than a thousand days in sadness, it's time to forget and look ahead. Didn't Papa say so? The mistakes of the past are so that we don't make it again. You've grown up now, it's time for you to learn to share in another person's worries."

I can smell Xiao Feng bringing dinner, which normally would send me running, but today I don't move from my spot. I tell him to bring the food inside, I don't feel well. Xiao Feng worries that I'm sick and has Jiu Ye come check on me. It was Jiu Ye who treated his sick grandpa. I quickly said it was nothing, startled to learn that Jiu Ye knew medicine.

After dinner, I kept thinking about how to run the business when there was a knock on the door and I absentmindedly said to come in. It was Jiu Ye, and I wanted to wrap a towel around my head but couldn't find one, so I just covered my ears. I pulled on the string by accident and it hurt like heck. He asked if I was sick, and then saw my ears "Hong Gu pierced your ears?"

I pouted and nodded. He laughed "Take your hand away, didn't Hong Gu tell you not to touch it for 10 to 20 days otherwise it will get infected?"

I realized that if it was infected, the string would be removed and after the infection heals, I'll be pierced again. I quickly put my hands down. Jiu Ye looked at my weepy expression and shook his head with a smile. He turned his wheelchair around and left, returning shortly with a small ceramic pot. He explained that this was aged wine that was good for preventing infections.

He gestured with a white cloth for me to tilt my head so I knelt down and turned my head towards him. His cold hands lightly touched my ear lobes and barely grazed my cheeks, but I felt my face heat up. He used his hand to hold my head still and when I turned, my lips accidentally pressed against his palm. My heart thumped and I quickly shifted my head, staring intently at my skirt hem on the ground. His hand stilled for a moment before it resumed cleaning my ears.

As he wiped my ears with the wine, he revealed that he had his ears pierced as a child. Since he was a sickly child, his mom heard that piercing the ear to pretend to raise the boy as a girl will make the child easier to raise healthy.

To create the earring hole, Hong Gu strung some ugly moles on the ends of the string. I asked if he had those when he got his ears pierced. He teased me “My mom had mine painted in rainbow colors to make me happy.” I looked at him with some pity, clearly his were even more conspicuous than mine.

After he wheeled himself out, I remained kneeling on the pallet for quite some time. Suddenly I stood up and started dancing and twirling on the pallet. Until my body grew tired and I collapsed on my covers, where I buried my head in the blanket and smiled like a loony. When wolves are young, they learn to lick their own wounds. So this is what it feels like to be taken care of by someone else. It is so warm, and I want to be a human. Papa Papa, I am so happy right now!

Buried in the blankets, I had my goofy smile for a long time. Suddenly I sat up and grabbed a hankerchief and wrote along the edges of it.

“Happiness is the flower that grows in the heart. Beautiful and seductive, lingering and enchanting a person. But the memory can lie, and I worry that one day I won’t remember today’s happiness. So I want to write down what happens from now on. So that one day when I am old, so old that I can’t even walk, I can sit on a pallet and read these hankerchiefs and see my own happiness. There will be times of sadness, but no matter if it’s happy or sad, it’s the traces of the life I led. But I will try my hardest to be

happy.....”

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While dining at Yi Ping Ju, the top restaurant in the city, we heard a beggar singing a folk tale song outside. The performance was so well received the beggar was greatly rewarded by those who listened. It gave us the idea to add a story to our dances, which had until now been just a performance without any narrative. After a month, I came up with an interesting story, with songs and lyrics to accompany it.

Hong Gu was worried, a story about a princess and her horse servant falling in love and overcoming all odds to be married. I thought it was romantic. Hong Gu pointed out that even an idiot would see that, despite all the names being changed, it was the story about the current Han princess, Princess Pingyang, and her husband the Great General Wei (who was formerly her horse servant). That was exactly what I intended.

Hong Gu asked “You want to use the whispered about story that everyone in Chang An has heard about, the story about the current Great General Wei, to incite everyone’s curiosity and bring in the audience who wants to hear gossip. But one person is the current General holding all the military might in the Kingdom, and the other is the older sister to the current Han Emperor. Have you thought about their reaction?”

I popped a sweet in my mouth and responded “What kind of reaction? Great General Wei was base-born and endured a lot of hardships in his youth, which is why he understands the struggles of the common people, and why he has such a gentle persona. He is someone who will not create unnecessary scenes. If he hears of this, he will likely laugh it off and ignore us. Princess Pingyang is always worried about the age gap between her and General Wei. On the surface she pretends not to care, but she really does care what others think. Her biggest worry is that General Wei married her because of her birth, but deep down he dislikes that she’s much older than him. But this dance performance will highlight their love story, how they fell in love despite their great differences and only could be together after the Emperor discovered it and used a decree to allow them to get married.

What a fabulous happy ending!”

Hong Gu asked about the Emperor, leaving me laughing at how impressed she must be with my prowess, that the performance I devised could potentially reach the ears of the Emperor. If that happened, it would mean we really were famous. Hong Gu knows this industry, if we perform it, we’ll be famous.

I explain that I tried my best to paint the Emperor in the best light, as wise and brave. How he receives it is beyond my control. But I want to take this chance and asks her to take it with me. She sighed, impressed with my youth and guts. She’s endured not being famous for so long, she wants to take this leap of faith with me, especially since I’ve put so much thought into it.

Fang Ru suddenly returns, softly telling us that she wants to return to the dancing house. She appears resigned, but then loses her temper at me, asking if I’m happy now that she’s returned. Isn’t this what I wanted all along? I tell her to stop blaming the others and the world for what happened to her. She starts to cry and let out her frustrations, while Hong Gu comforts her. I tell her “When Hong Gu was six, she was sold by her brother so he could marry a woman. I don’t even know who my parents are. All the girls here have sob stories. At least you had good parents for many years. I’ve already torn up your sales contract so you are coming back as a free woman. You can leave anytime. But if you choose to stay, you have to follow the rules of this house.”

After Fang Ru goes to rest, I ask Hong Gu how it feels to play a good guy for once. She concedes it feels good, and she has seen that my methods produce better results than forcing girls to do what they hate. I have Fang Ru start learning the part of the princess, with two other girls to learn the part of the Great General Wei. I tell Hong Gu to adjust the performance as necessary and I’ll leave it up to her, since I’m going home now. I suddenly realize that I used the word “home”, not sure when that started. Hong Gu laughs, asking me to just move here to make it more efficient and more fun to spend time together. I make a moue at her without responding, getting in the carriage and heading off.

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I noticed through the window that it was another full moon night, surprising me to realize it. Brother Wolf is likely strolling under the moonlight, and occasionally howling at the moon. Does he think of me? I don't know if wolves have this emotion. I'll ask him when I go back to see him. Or perhaps he has a mate now, someone to howl at the moon with.

Chang An and Xi Yu are vastly different. Looking skyward, there is bound to be an obstruction like a rooftop or a wall. In the desert plains, everywhere you look the sky connects with the edges of the earth. But right now I am sitting on the roof and looking at the sky, and it looks as expansive.

I touch the flute in my hand. Being busy choreographing the performance, I haven't touched it in a long time. I don't know if I can play the Bai To Ying tune I just learned. I play with a series of stops and starts, filled with mistakes. But I'm still happy. Not being able to howl at the moon, playing at the moon is also an enjoyment. After playing it another time, it's much smoother and I feel quite proud of myself.

As I'm being all full of myself towards the moon, the sound of another flute wafts up to me. It's leisurely and elegant, like a fairy dancing or a beauty weeping. Jiu Ye sits in the courtyard playing a flute. The same flute, mine sounds like a hungry 80 year old while his sounds like a fair maiden at the banks of a river. His music seems to be pulling at the moonlight, illuminating him with a silvery essence so that his white robe makes him appear indescribably handsome.

The song ends yet I remain bathed in the conflicting emotion of happiness turned to woe [that her tune was so bad compare to Jiu Ye]. He held his flute and looked up at me "Bai To Ying is a song about a woman's despair. If your heart isn't aligned, it's impossible to capture all the tonal shifts. This is my first time hearing this tune played with such a happy vibe. Thankfully you have an expansive lung to play it."

I stuck my tongue out at him "This is the only tune I know, so

tomorrow I'll go learn more. Your playing is so wonderful to listen to. Keep playing, I'm in such a happy playing mood." I pointed to the moon "The bright moon, the clear sky, the swaying bamboo trees next to you, these are all such happy things." Sometimes people are not as well off as wolves. Wolves always get excited at the full moon, whereas people often ignore it.

Jiu Ye looked at me for a moment before nodding "You are right, these are all happy things." He looked at the moon again before raising his flute to his lips. I don't know this tune, but it sounds like a spring rain where people are laughing, the trees are laughing, the blades of grass are laughing. I stare at Jiu Ye playing the flute. I don't know why you have this hidden sorrow in your eyes, but I want to ease it.

Under the black and blue night sky, with the moon hovering over us, one of us sits in the courtyard, the other sits on the roof with knees drawn up, the bamboos as dancer and the jade flute as music.

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Fang Ru's quiet and restrained performance as the princess sending her general off to war is heartbreaking, so the people in the audience sniffle and wipe their tears away. Hong Gu is shocked at how well Fang Ru is doing after a slightly shaky start. She thinks in 10 days, Luo Yu House will be the hottest place in all of Chang An. I smile and walk outside.

It's April already, the air bursting with energy. All the excitement I kept pent up in front of Hong Gu finally bubbles forth. What is waiting for me in the future? Will I achieve the objective I hid within the dance performance? I hear a noise and walk to the courtyard to see the music conductor pushing a man out. He explains this man wants a job as a musician here but we already have enough.

The young man is wearing worn but clean robes, a clear open face that looks honest but slightly worried. I got a good impression from him so ask where he's from. He's just arrived at Chang An, and his name is Li Yan Nian. I allow him to play for me, and he's come prepared with his lute

carried on his back. He starts to play and his music is extraordinary, transporting the audience to the vast wilderness where nature and music blend seamlessly together.

I know I must keep this talent no matter what. I ask why he's seeking employment here. With his talent, the more famous Tian Xian House ought to be his first choice. He admits that he went there already and they want him. He explains that he's lost his parents recently and traveled here with his younger brother and sister to seek a living. His sister heard about the new dance performance of "Hua Yue Nong" (Flower Moon Passion) here at Luo Yu House and insisted he come here to play for us.

Li Yan Nian explained that his sister thinks the performance of Hua Yue Nong was surely well calculated. I was stunned to know that his sister saw through my intentions and could see that this was no simple dance performance. Since I was small, I learned tactic and strategy, with Papa teaching me that life can change on a dime. Having once experienced a cataclysmic event, after entering the Shi Residence, I started collecting data on the rich and powerful in Chang An. But this sister of his appeared to have just arrived in Chang An and already knows the workings of it. Her decision to eschew a more famous dance house for ours is a decision made with purposeful forethought and the willingness to take a risk. If she knew my ulterior motive and therefore wants to enter Luo Yu House, what is her motive? Why does she want to meet Princess Pingyang?

I take a closer look at Li Yan Nian, finding him quite handsome. If his sister is equally as eye-catching, then I must keep this person. I doubled the offer he got from Tian Xian House. He accepted calmly, not seeming particularly happy. I tell him to call me Madam Yu, like everyone here does. I decide to call him Master Li, and invite him to move into the house with his siblings. He confirms that they are living in a shack in the outskirts of the city, and I share that I once lived in the forest when I first arrived, which finally elicits a smile of mutual understanding from him.

I ordered a room cleaned and inform Hong Gu I hired a new musician, telling her to trust me on this one, his talent is unparalleled. Li Yan Nian arrives the next morning with his siblings. His younger brother resembles him, with a bit more youthful brashness. His sister is covered in a face veil,

but even her walk is elegant like a dance, entrancing us all.

Under the veil, all I can see are her eyes, which are enough to assess her. It's seductive yet calculating, in a split second it felt like a flash of a sword slashed through the air. I'm intrigued! I smile, while besides me Hong Gu keeps sighing and sighing. This girl, just by her form, has caused Hong Gu who has seen countless beauties, to be speechless. Li Yan Nian bows to me and introduces his younger brother Li Guan Li and his sister Li Yan. [The Yan character in the names of Li Yan Nian and Li Yan are completely different characters in Chinese though pronounced the same.]

Li Guan Li happily checked out their residence, while Li Yan didn't enter the room but stood in place and looked at me. The first words she said to me was wondering why I did all this for them. She didn't think their status deserved my benefaction. Her voice was not like that of most girls. It was deep and low, requiring one to listen carefully to capture her words. It was akin to someone whispering in your ear at night, causing a twitching in the heart.

I told her "I normally don't like to be so obvious, but I really want to keep you. And it's all of you, not just Master Li. I like to do things in one clean swoop, so you don't have to move around, which is more hassle for all of us."

She asked "Us?" I laughed "Your brother is a master at the lute and handsome to boot. His sister understood my intentions simply by watching the dance performance I created. How can I let my kindred spirit be disappointed?"

Li Yan's eyes reveal twinkling mirth "Madam is surely very perceptive."

I didn't know there could be a female version of bosom buddies, where two people just get each other. I chuckled "No more than you. My name is Jin Yu."

She elegantly takes off her veil “I am Li Yan.”

I suck in a deep breath as I am hit by stunning shock. It's not like I haven't seen a beautiful woman before, but she is not someone that the word beautiful is even adequate to describe. So it's true that in this world, there is a kind of beauty that can make a person forget oneself. If the stars fell because of her, if the moon lost its lustre because of her, I would not be surprised.

Chapter 5: Shadow in the Window

On the 6th day of performing “Hua Yue Nong”, the prices have tripled and all the seats are sold out for days already. I’m paying the girls not only their wages, but also extra depending on their character performance on stage. Everyone is happy, even Fang Ru, who has rocketed to fame and can vie with the top dancers in the city on her fees for spending time with a customer [just chatting and drinking in a private box, not anything salacious].

The performance hall has a common area seating below, but also private boxes up top where the ladies or more high class clients can watch the performance in privacy. I bring the Li siblings to one private box. They protest such kindness but I tell them this is my box which I never rent out so they can use it. Li Yan gives me a look, wondering who I am keeping this room for? I smile at her, telling her to guess.

A maid comes running in and tells me Hong Gu desperately needs me because some very important guests have arrived. I stand up but then sit down to calm myself. Li Yan asks “Is the person you are waiting for finally arrived?” I nod “Most likely? Hong Gu grew up here and knows everyone. She won’t need me unless it’s urgent.” She asks if I need this room but I tell her there are other empty rooms. I sip my tea and fix my skirt before heading out, having calmed myself.

Outside I see Hong Gu leading two men down the hallway. She sees me and her face immediately relaxes. Xiao Huo, no, Huo Qu Bing, hair finely combed and adorned, with elegant and lavish attire, wearing a somber expression, is right there. The moment he sees me, his footsteps stop. I have a small smile on my face as I walk up to courtesy to him. “Young master Huo has deigned to visit our Luo Yu House, what an honor it is.”

He looks at me for a few moments, and then his face lit up and he smiles “You really came to Chang An!” Hong Gu looked at me and then looked at Huo Qu Bing, her face registering her confusion. I initially want

to mess with him a bit, but when he smiled so openly and didn't seem to feel bad at all, I got a bit annoyed. I shifted and gestured for him to keep going.

Suddenly another maid comes running to tell me that Wu Ye is here, with someone he calls Third Master Shi, and there is also someone else in the back of the carriage. I let out an "Ah!", pulling my skirt up and taking off. I suddenly remember and quickly run back to Huo Qu Bing and gave him a bow "I have an urgent matter to handle, will the young master please excuse me." I tell Hong Gu to bring him to his room before running outside.

Jiu Ye is pushing his wheelchair with Wu Ye, Tian Cao, Shi Feng following behind him. My happy voice arrives first "Why didn't you send someone ahead to tell me?" He laughs "It was a last minute decision to come see what has been keeping you so busy that you didn't even come home last night."

I wrinkle my nose and laugh, walking beside him "I wasn't busy last night, I was admiring a beauty. Later I'll let you meet the beauty." He smiles and doesn't respond.

At the end of the hallway, I tell the others to climb the stairs. They don't move until Jiu Ye tells them to go. I take Jiu Ye into a very small room, the size of a large box really, fitting only me and Jiu Ye inside. I can't even fully straighten my body, needing to crouch down next to Jiu Ye. I apologize "Because of safety reasons, it couldn't be built any bigger." The door is closed and I pull a bell. Soon the room starts to lift. Jiu Ye quietly asks "Did you build this on purpose?" I nod a yes.

In the darkness it's extremely quiet, so quiet it's like we can hear our thumping heartbeats. The candle is within reach but I don't move to light it. Jiu Ye doesn't mention it either. We just stay in this cramped space in silence. The light fresh scent from his body slowly drifts over to me, and his scent seems to enter my heart.

When we arrive, the performance has started. I make tea for Jiu Ye

while Wu Ye urges me to go back and find Hong Gu, who is left with a mess to handle. Jiu Ye also tells me to go do my job.

When Hong Gu sees me, she shoves the tea set at me “I can’t stand it anymore! Young master Huo’s face can freeze a person. Since he stepped inside, I feel like it’s Winter descended again. I tried to be pleasant, saying a million things, but he doesn’t even raise an eyebrow. I’m frightened out of my wits, wondering if our performance, having not offended the Great General, has instead enraged the city’s most arrogant young lord. But when you show up, he starts to smile. I don’t know what’s going on between you two but I’m not going to be a part of it anymore. I’m afraid I’ll lose my life.”

I ask her to stay but she tells me to handle it as the head of the house. I sigh and take the tea set, walking slowly to the room. The servant opens the door for me and I walk in. The young master Huo who supposedly has the power to change the weather in this city is watching the performance with a poker face. I put the tea set down and place a cup before him. He doesn’t look at me so I also don’t feel like speaking. I turn to watch the show. He picks up the cup and takes a sip, which is when the performance arrives at the scene when the dancer Qiu Xiang appears while dressed as the Great General. She takes a fake sword and dances around the stage, raging at the Xiong Nu.

Huo Qu Bing spits out his tea and bends down, with one hand on the table and the other on the tea set, his body rocking gently. I hurry before him and take his cup and put it on the table, moving to wipe the table dry. He tempers down his laughter and points at Qiu Xiang on the stage. “If the Great General Wei looked like that, clearly it would be the Xiong Nu who kill him, rather than him killing the Xiong Nu.”

I recall the fierceness of the Xiong Nu and I also force myself not to laugh. I get up to go back to my seat when he grabs me. I look at him and he says “This performance, other than the one playing the princess, doesn’t have anything worth watching. Sit down and talk with me. I have something to ask you.”

“Yes, young master Huo.”

“Xiao Yu, I couldn’t tell you who I was back then, but you can still call me Xiao Huo”, he said with a touch of exasperation.

“You believe I’m a Han person now?”

“I don’t know, your appearance was inexplicably mysterious, you knew the Xi Yu territory intimately. You call yourself a Han, but you are not familiar with the Han world. If we weren’t on guard, would that be normal of us? After traveling with you a bit, I knew you had no ill intentions. But I was disguised on that trip to Xi Yu, so I still couldn’t tell you my real identity.” I keep my head lowered, knowing that what he said is true.

His softly asked “Xiao Yu, can you accept my explanation?”

I raise my head to look at him “I know the Xi Yu territory because I was raised in the wolf pack. We have the ability not to get lost in the desert. I never lived in Han territory which is why it’s foreign. I call myself a Han because I see myself as a Han here” and I point to my heart. “But maybe I don’t resemble anybody, and I belong in the wolf pack. This is all I can say for now. Can you believe me?”

He stared into my eyes and nodded his head “I believe. As for the rest, perhaps you’ll tell me one day.”

Only trusting someone will a person stare directly into the eyes, and Huo Qu Bing is that kind of person. After our eyes meet, I quickly turn away. I don’t want to probe into his thoughts, and don’t want him to probe into mine.

He asked “How long have you been in Chang An?” I replied “Half a year.”

He was silent and then asked “Since you deliberately prepared this performance, you must already know who I am. Why didn’t you come find me? What if I heard about the performance but still didn’t come?”

So he misunderstood that this performance was for him. He’s so self-absorbed and I smile mockingly at him “When I wanted to find you, I didn’t know where. And when I knew where you were, I thought it didn’t matter if I saw you again.”

He looked at me, and then his voice turned cold “What is the purpose of this performance?” His hands fisted suddenly “You want to enter the Palace? I thought you were an exotic desert bloom, but turns out you are yet another who wishes to become a Palace phoenix.” [Phoenix here means one of the Emperor’s concubines.]

I shake my head with a smile “No, I’m perfectly fine so why do I want to go to that godforsaken place?” His expression relaxed and he looked towards Fang Ru. I shake my head again “She’s innocent and just looking for a way to make a living. I doubt she’ll survive there.” He wondered “So it’s not this and it’s not that. What exactly are you thinking?”

I look at Fang Ru, playing the Princess, and confirm my target. He raises his eyebrows “Your idea is right on target then. The Princess has heard of “Hua Yue Nong” and asked me if I’ve been here and seen the person who choreographed the performance.”

He returns to watch the performance so we sit in silence. I move to excuse myself when he says “In this performance, everything is calculated and each lyric is well thought out. Yet earlier you left me and rushed outside to welcome the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. Aren’t you worried about upsetting me?”

I knew I was rash back there but I don’t regret it. “He’s my Big Boss, there is no reason I shouldn’t go and welcome him” He shot me a glance “Really? My position doesn’t measure up to a boss?”

Hong Gu enters and apologizes profusely to Huo Qu Bing, explaining that the Big Boss is quite angry and berating Wu Ye. I need to run so I shoot an apologetic look at Huo Qu Bing “I have to go. I can see you’re not a petty person, so don’t make it difficult for me right no. I have to go accept my punishment, so my situation is pretty dire as is.”

He replied “No wonder the Princess was confused as to why the Shi Enterprises was doing things differently. You are a bold one, without getting the approval of you boss, you put on a performance about the Imperial family’s private life.” I don’t respond but merely stand up. He suddenly said “Do you want me to accompany you?”

I startle and feel a soft warmth inside. I shake my head. He sends me a lazy smile and says with some teasing “Don’t bend over backwards. If Shi Enterprises doesn’t want you, my estate will take you.” I shoot him a glance before walking out.

I tell Hong Gu not to be afraid, I’ll take full responsibility. Xiao Feng lets me through and humphs at me “You need to think about how to explain yourself to Jiu Ye. No wonder Master San teaches me that a woman is hard to keep around.” I rap him on the head and scowl at him “You little rascal, you better not get married someday then.”

When I enter, Wu Ye is kneeling on the ground while Jiu Ye doesn’t appear upset. I walk up and also kneel. Jiu Ye sends Wu Ye away to await his punishment. He bows and tearfully tries to explain that he was raised by the family and just wanted to raise the prosperity of the family business.

Jiu Ye looks at me “You really surprised me. If you have such cunning, this Luo Yu House isn’t good enough for you. Instead of running a business, you decide to pander to the Imperial family. What are you getting at?” Wu Ye tries to explain that I am young and just want to attract more customers, and it’s his fault for not restraining me. Jiu Ye huffs that the performance is calculated in each and every lyric. If I wanted to grow the business, any old narrative will do. I chose such a big risk clearly because I had a bigger purpose.

I concede “I am purposefully trying to attract the attention of Princess Yangping so I can make a connection with her.” I explain my guesses for why the Shi Enterprises have fallen in recent times. It rose to prominence with the Bao family gained the Imperial favor. But with the fall of the Bao family and the rise of the Wei family, the business went along with it. I just want to build ties with the Wei family, currently the reigning power in court, to build the business back up.

Jiu Ye looks at me “Ms Jin Yu. The Shi Enterprises employ thousands of people who don’t have your cunning and wits, nor your ambition. I can’t afford to take this risk with you. From now on, I’m selling Luo Yu House and it will no longer have any ties to the Shi Enterprises. How you want to run it is your business. Tian Cao, let’s return home.” He looks calm but distant, acting like he doesn’t care a whit.

I stare in disbelief but he doesn’t give me another glance. Because we are kneeling in his path, he asked us politely to move aside with a voice as cold as ice, ice that can freeze a person’s heart. I stand up and rush out. I suddenly remember that he needs to get downstairs but hates letting others assist him. I turn back to find someone to show Tian Cao and Shi Feng how to operate the lift.

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I’m reading the classics and thinking back to what Jiu Ye said to me. His words are true, but if I’m careful, there ought to be only positives to come of making ties with the Princess and the Wei family. Li Yan comes in with some wine, asking how long I plan to stay locked up inside. She wonders what I have in store for the Li siblings, they can’t just stay here doing nothing. I decline the wine she offers, finding in it a temporary solace that I have no need of. Li Yan takes a drink, appreciating how the drink can take a person away from their real life for awhile.

I tell her “I don’t know, originally I was intending to change the fortunes of the Shi Enterprises by getting the pieces ready, but then I discovered that no one wanted me to do so. It was all my unsolicited offering. Li Yan, did I do something wrong?”

Li Yan replies “Jin Yu, how can you say such stupid things. Life is a river and we are always fighting to go upstream and not get swept away. You can’t even hope to maintain Luo Yu House with the competition out there.”

I compliment her for being so observant despite being new here. She grabs my hand and asks to be candid with me. She knows my intention behind the performance and that is hers as well. She asks for my assistance. I tell her that even without my help, with her beauty and brains, she’ll achieve whatever she sets out to do regardless. Li Yan looks down and takes a drink of wine, looking deep in thought and solemn. Her beauty is astounding but now it comes with a downcast aura.

Fang Ru comes to ask if it’s true that we’ve been cut loose. Hong Gu enters and reveals that Shi Enterprises is planning to divest from all the dancing houses managed by Wu Ye, who is so distraught he’s inconsolable. Anyone with money can buy the dancing houses, and supposedly the money will be used to start a herbal business. Hong Gu is thrilled, because this means one less overseer.

I look down and ask if they are sure they want to follow me. Who knows where I will lead them? Hong Gu is sure. If we get in trouble and it’s off with our heads, mine is the first to go and they can all plead innocence or as accomplices. If we earn rewards and riches, I’m sure to share with them. She’s decided to stick by me, especially since I’m not stupid and is clearly not looking for trouble. Fang Gu revealed that she rejected a customer’s request to drink with him, but the man didn’t dare get angry with her, knowing that all the Wei family officials have been by to watch Fang Ru perform and even praised her. All Fang Ru knows is that she can say “no” now to customers, and that is because of me. I tell everyone that we should keep going forward then, keep trying to make money.

Hong Gu reveals that we’ve made so much money since I took over that we have enough to buy Luo Yu House. I don’t respond, and ask Li Yan to take a walk with me. Li Yan asks if I’m going over to the Shi Estate tonight? She finds it odd that the Big Boss doesn’t want to operate a steady business like dancing houses, and instead wants to venture into herbal

medicines with lots of market pricing risk.

We walk by the lake where some girls are playing, breaking off branches from the willow tree to go make waves in the water. Li Yan looks momentarily displeased before excusing herself to go back. I ask the girls if the branches will grow if it's planted in the soil. They explain the planting season has passed for the willow tree. I suggest having a gardner try, and explaining that breaking off healthy branches to play with is a waste of a it's beauty. These girls grew up here and don't understand and appreciate the verdant beauty of nature.

I think about Papa, about Xi Yu, about the desert, sitting by the lake and looking out in a daze. I recall Li Yan being unhappy about the broken branches, but she doesn't appear to be someone who is maudlin about nature. Her background is a mystery, and then I suddenly have a clarity about who she might be. I let out an "Ah", and then there was also a shout from behind me. I turn around and Huo Qu Bing is behind me. I turn so quickly that I almost collided with his chest, so I jumped backwards. Then realized that the lake was right behind me, so I tried to turn again but couldn't find a spot.

Huo Qu Bing reached out to grab my hand, but since I jumped so far back, our hands barely touched each other before I fell into the lake. I learned how to swim from Brother Wolf, which is what might be termed the "wolfy paddle". It's the exact opposite of elegant, stylish, and beautiful. I swam towards the shore while Huo Qu Bing stood by the banks and laughed at me. He was laughing so hard he was clutching his belly and almost toppled over. "You really were raised by wolves. This stroke, this stroke, hahahahahaha, all you need to do is stick your tongue out....." The rest of what he was saying was drowned out by his laughter.

I was so mad that I paddled and stuck my tongue out at him like a wolf. I'll let him laugh himself to death. He let out a yelp and then covered his eyes, crouching on the ground with his head lowered, just laughing.

I reach the shore and he reached his hand out to help me up. Initially I wanted to ignore him, and then changed my mind and grabbed his hand.

But then I took a deep breath and fell back into the water. Surprisingly he didn't resist, and his hand only tightened before his body followed mine into the water. Once I got my evil way, I wanted to let go of his hand, but instead he held on tight. Underneath the water, we stared at each other. His hair billowed out around his face, making his smile seem even more carefree.

I kick the water and head towards the surface. He holds my hand and swims up as well. As we reach the shore, he still hasn't let go of my hand. I use my free hand to pinch him but he grabs it, now holding on to both my hands. I decide to use that momentum and kick him down there. He notices my devilish look and looks down, letting go of my hands "Why are you so evil, woman! If you actually kicked the target, I'd be through with this world."

I hold on to the edge of the shore and heave myself out of the water. My clothes are plastered to me. I can hear him chuckling in the water. I rush back to the house without looking back. As I was changing clothes, I told the maid outside "Inform the entire house that if the young master Huo's servant asks for clean clothes, no one is allowed to give it to him. You can say this is my orders. All the male clothes are being washed, but we have plenty of female skirts. You can give him one or two of those." She quizzically agreed and ran off. I brushed my hair in the copper mirror and started to smile. Daring to make fun of me in my territory, let's see who is the embarrassed one now.

At dinner time, Hong Gu asks me "Today the young master Huo entered the house with a frigid expression, didn't even watch a single performance and promptly disappeared. His servant asked for clean clothing, but since you already gave the order, we were all torn. Afraid he'd get so pissed he would smash the house down. The entire Chang An city knows that upsetting the Great General Wei is no big deal, but pissing off the young master Huo, one ought to get ready to for a funeral."

I smile and give Hong Gu some vegetables "So did you give or not?" She made a sad face "Didn't give, but I almost died of fright. I don't care how you two play around, but don't get us random people involved. A woman can't be frightened, we'll age really fast."

I muffled my laughter “So did you see the young master Huo?” She responded “No, later his servant ordered a carriage out back and told everyone to leave. Since he left....but.....but....” I asked “But what?”

She started laughing now “But....wherever the young master Huo walked is like that area has been rained on. The room he stayed in, the entire pallet is soaked through, and the seat cushion as well.” I tossed my chopstick and put my hand on the table, holding my stomach shaking in laughter.

The current Han Emperor is a devotee of Confucius, especially in the learnings about “etiquette.” So says “Morals stem from etiquette. Clothing is the basis”, one’s clothes becomes the most fundamental requirement of every citizen in Chang An. Since Huo Qu Bing is always perfectly dressed and groomed, looking dashing, this time he must be in a bind. If any of the rich and powerful in Chang An accidentally saw him, he would become the laughingstock of the court.

I recall his always fearless gaze, and then feel like it’s wrong of me to laugh. Would he care? No, he wouldn’t. He’s not a man who would be constrained by his clothing. He’ll avoid being seen, but if he is, he’ll just put on a poker face and act like he doesn’t see the other person. It’ll make the other person wonder if he’s dressed incorrectly himself, and that a “wet, damp look” is suddenly en vogue in Chang An. Or he’ll just laugh it off, letting the other person realize it’s just not a big deal.

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The wind whips through my ears, this is the first time I’ve run full speed since arriving in Chang An. I’m almost tempted to let out a long howl. Arriving at the Shi Estate, I loss a rope and climb over the walls. The second my feet touch the ground, two men are on me. I try not to hurt them but they are not weak, pining me against the wall. I call out “Shi Buo, it’s Yu Er.”

He called off the guards and asked me why I didn’t use the perfectly good front door. I took off my face veil and pouted, but didn’t answer. He

sighed, not understanding us youngsters. He told me to go find Jiu Ye, who is likely still awake. I tease that I came to see him, causing him to laugh, but he begs old age and needing sleep, taking off.

I take off towards the Bamboo Forest, where a flute is playing. The light is on in the residence and his shadow is inked on the windows, seemingly lonely and cold. I stand outside and finish listening to him play. I'm right outside the window where his shadow is on the paper panes. I reach out my hand but then lower it, back and forth, until finally my fingers lightly brush his shadow face. This is your eyes, this is your eyebrows, this is your nose, this is....this is your lips. I lightly touch it and my heart flips. I quickly move aside and touch between his eyes. I can't see, but I know this area is filled with worry. Can I be the wind, and blow that worry away? You are his shadow, you must know what he's thinking about? Please tell me what worries him so? Tell me!

The window softly opens and his face appears before me. My hand is suspended in mid-air, but so close to his face. So close that I can almost feel his body heat, but in the end I still don't make contact. I have this indescribable feeling in my heart – happy or sad? I sheepishly smile at him and pull my hand back, putting it behind my back. He smiles “How long have you been here?” “I just arrived” I say.

He invites me in since it's foggy outside. I got inside and he puts his flute down on the table. I see the oil lamp flickering a warm light, taking out my silver hair piece and I tamp down the extra specks of popping oil to make the light calmer. I ask why he's using oil rather than wax, is he learning to be like commoners? He replies “There is a saying “Oil popping, Happy tidings arriving”. My heart leaps but I pretend to be calm “So is it true or not?”

He lifts a corner of his lips but doesn't answer. “There is also a saying that the oil lamp can avoid ghosts, shining a blue light on the spirits to identify them. When the lamp turned blue is when I opened the window, and you were standing there. Did you feel anything next to you?” I laugh “I hear ghosts love handsome young man, sucking their yang essence dry. You ought to beware.” His reply “So it's true that you aren't afraid of anything in this world. Is there anything you are afraid of then?” I almost

say "You!" but I was afraid to, not wanting to ruin this teasing mood under the lamp.

I tease that Xiao Feng revealed he knew medicine, asking if his services can be used if anyone in my house got sick. He laughs that being a sick child he saw so many doctors he naturally learned their craft just by observing. I feel a bit sad to hear this and look at the window. If someone was looking at us from outside, they would see two reflections in the window, close together. He asks why I'm smiling and I say no reason, I just want to. I ask why he's smiling, and he answers the same thing.

We quietly sit next to each other. I take the flute and try to play a few bars of poor tune. He looks slightly odd and I realize that the flute is still damp from his playing. I feel a sense of happiness and put the flute back on the table. After some time, he tells me to go to sleep since it's late. I'm surprised he still wants to let me stay here, and he responds that that room has always been empty so keeping it for me is no big deal. Running my business simply means it's not convenient for me to stay here all the time.

I ask again why he doesn't want to run the dancing houses, and whether he would object to me buying the dancing houses he's giving up on? He doesn't care, as long as I can afford to buy it, once it's sold it will have no further ties with the Shi Enterprises. We will each run our own business. I angrily stare at him, the more he wants to clearly define the boundaries between us, the more I'm going to make it as complicated as possible. I ask him to lend me money. He agrees to lend me money enough to buy Luo Yu House, telling me to be satisfied with just that.

He smiles "Yu Er, the waters of Chang An are deep, and I'm already forced to carry that bucket of rancid water. But you can live clean and free. So if you want to run a business, just be satisfied with running Luo Yu House." I pout "It's not that easy, if I don't encroach on others, others will encroach on me. Will Tian Xiang House let Luo Yu House survive?" He promises that he'll make Tian Xiang House leave me alone.

I realized that he could still help me. I tell him "Jiu Ye, I don't want to be the silk growing on the tree. The silk can only survive because of the

tree, which blocks all the wind and rain for the silk. But won't the tree grow tired, or if the rain is too strong the tree needs some help too. The silk can only watch and do nothing. I don't want to survive needing to rely on the tree. I also want to be the tree that can help the other trees nearby block the wind and the rain, then enjoying the sun together, admiring the beautiful rainbow that appears after a storm."

When I finish, I wonder if what I just said was akin to saying I wanted to accompany him, causing my face to burn up. The look in his eyes is so conflicted and he keeps looking at me. My heart does flip flops and I lower my head. After a few moments he said "Yu Er, you do what your heart tells you to do."

I raise my head in happiness and stare at him. He smiles "But I will only lend you the money to buy Luo Yu House. If you want to be a tree, you'll have to use your own capability to battle with the rain and winds." Since he won't lend me all the money, I tell him I'll find a way. He is looking forward to what I'll do.

When I ask why he decided to enter the herbal medicine business, he tells me that since we've drawn our boundaries, from now on neither will inquire into the other's business. My warm heart suddenly dropped a few degrees. I stare at him, wondering if I asked something wrong? He gives me a look of mild exasperation "Yu Er, you are not the same as me. What I'm doing is what is best for you, And what is best for those dancing houses."

"What is different between us?" He doesn't answer and tells me to go to sleep, he's tired as well. He does look tired and I quickly get up "I'll be going then." He takes the lamp and puts on a new candle wick for me. I take it and bow to him, walking back to my room with the lamp in my hand.

Chapter 6: Topsy

I wake up late so by the time I return to Luo Yu House the girls are practicing dance under the tutelage of Li Yan. Hong Gu mutters that if I didn't show up soon, she'd be reporting a missing person to the authorities. We watch the dance, with Li Yan occasionally offering pointers, but her every gesture is as arresting as ever. I discuss with Hong Gu how Li Yan's dance appears to incorporate a foreign flavor, like she's taken the passion of the Xi Yu dancers and fluidly added it to her movements. But her performance doesn't have the flirty seductiveness of those dances, managing to be captivating and feminine while she remains pure and seemingly untouchable.

Li Yan asks if I've gotten the gold card to go ahead. I don't answer her but turn to Hong Gu, asking her to collect data on all the dance houses that will be divested. I plan to buy four of them. We have enough money for two, and I will find a way to get the rest. Hong Gu rushes off to do my bidding. Li Yan smiles "Slowly and surely, with preparation and patience. You call me your kindred spirit, but now I don't think I even deserve that. As long as you want to, every single dancing house in Chang An will be under your control."

I laugh and murmur "I'm the one who ought to wipe away some sweat. The dancing houses in Chang An are likely not even within your sights."

Initially she thought my intention behind the performance was to enter the Palace, but now it's clear I just want to run a successful business. While girls in this industry want to one day leave, I appear to be just fine being in it. What are my intentions?

I respond "It's not as complicated as you think. I'm just someone without any ties, and no desire for power or wealth. Unless the power and wealth can make me happy, then gold and silver mountains mean less to me than a full moon in the desert. My actions are well calculated and I will do anything to achieve my goal, but the ultimate reason is that I want to

make myself happy, and make the person I care about happy. If Chang An isn't fun anymore, perhaps one day I will grow tired and run back to Xi Yu."

Li Yan looks at me "You are someone without any constraints. Like an eagle in the sky. You ought be flying in a place like Xi Yu, Chang An is likely not suitable for you." I ask if she's been to Xi Yu, but she hasn't and has only heard her father describe it.

Suddenly Hong Gu comes running in to inform us that Princess Pinyang's servant come by with word that the Princess is on her way. I get dragged out to change, wondering if I'm supposed to welcome her at the door with a kneel and a bow, chanting "long live your highness." I tell Li Yan to have Master Li prepare as well.

I am seated and everyone crowds around to primp me, which is akin to torture with the pulling and the tugging, then affixing a hair piece to add more volume. Hong Gu goes to ask all the guests to leave, telling them the Princess is coming. I stop her, telling her not to reveal the Princess is coming and just give everyone back their money. I don't want to start bandying about the Princess' name already.

My eyes start to cross at the sight of all the silk and jewels being placed on me, leading me to wonder if everything of value Hong Gu owns is on my body right now. I tell her to stop, but she makes me exchange my ear bobs for a jewel encrusted waterfall earring. She tells me that a woman's entire appearance is of value. I run away to wait for the Princess, not wanting to be tormented any more. Standing at the door, I anticipate meeting the woman responsible for the rise to prominence of the Wei family and the Emperor stripping Empress Chao of her title [The Emperor stripped his first wife Empress Chao of her Empress title to hand it over to his new love Wei Zhi Fu, making her Empress Wei. Wei Zhi Fu is the sister to the Great General Wei, who also happens to be the Princess Pingyang's husband. This makes Huo Qu Bing nephew to the Emperor, Empress, Princess, and Prince Consort.]

The Princess arrives, and her servants appear pleased to see how I'm

dressed to welcome their highness. I escort the Princess in after she informs us that she is here to watch the performance. I ask if she wants to see the entire thing since it's quite long, and she asks us to put on the best scenes. Li Yan Nian arrives and bows simply and respectfully to the Princess.

Qiu Xiang and Fang Ru, under the accompaniment of Li Yan Nian's lute, enact scenes where the princess is sending her general off to war. His stirring music, plus the emotional performances of Fang Ru and Qiu Xiang on stage, cause the room to be silent and even the servants of the princess are red-rimmed. Before the song is even finished, suddenly the door opens and the Princess' servant says "Young master Huo requests an audience with the Princess." Before his words fall Huo Qu Bing is already walking boldly into the room.

The Princess laughs "You're still so impatient, if your uncle (Great General Wei) saw you right now, he will surely lecture you." Huo Qu Bing bows to the Princess and goes to sit beside her "He says what he wants, I do what I want. If I get annoyed, then I'll just avoid him."

"Avoid him? How long has it been since you've paid your respects to your uncle? I recall you coming by around New Year's to greet us, but since then you show up only when your uncle isn't around. It's almost been half a year, and we're all a family, you....."

Huo Qu Bing hurriedly says "My dear Princess Auntie, can you please just let your dear nephew off the hook this time. When I enter the Palace, I get lectured to by Empress Wei, so why is even my kind Princess Auntie lecturing me now as well. Maybe in the future I won't visit the Princess' Estate anymore."

The Princess shook her head at him and resumed watching the performance. Immediately Huo Qu Bing's expression turned from the warm Spring to the dead of Winter and he turned to stare at me, checking me out from top to bottom with his icy eyes. Finally he pined my eyes to his. I pretended not to notice. He kept staring at me only until the performance finished and Fang Ru, Qiu Xiang, and Li Yan Nian arrive to kneel before the Princess.

The Princess compliments them on a great performance, but she does not want this performance to ever be put on again. Everyone's color disappears from their faces, and I hurry to kneel before the Princess, ready to accept her orders. She smiles, knowing this performance was so well thought out, and I was quite brave.

Huo Qu Bing stands up and walks over to me, kneeling down right next to me and cutting off what the Princess was saying "Qu Bing needs to beg forgiveness from the Princess." Even though he said beg forgiveness, but his face has an expression of not a care. The Princess smiles in shock "What did you do wrong? You guys go check if the sun will be setting in the East today" as she gestures to her servants.

"This is a long story, and it starts when Qu Bing first met this Ms Jin...." As Huo Qu Bing talked, his hands grabbed mine from underneath our robes.

The Han dynasty attire style mandates wide and large sleeves. Kneeling down next to each other, our sleeves overlapped, which allowed him now to do this without detection. When I realized what he was doing, he already reached my fingers. I immediately used my middle finger to poke his nerve. He was smiling and talking to the Princess, but his reaction was immediate and he avoided my middle finger and managed to grab my entire hand until it was in his grasp.

He seemed pleased and shot me a sideways glance. He gave my hand a squeeze and I raised my head to look at the Princess. She was listening to a very nervous part of the story and staring intently at Huo Qu Bing. It was like she was being pursued by the desert thieves, her life in the balance.

I relaxed my strength and my hand softened in his grasp. His words slightly slowed down and he gave me a head lowered questioning look. I kept my head lowered and didn't move. Slowly I used my strength to use my nail to poke the center of his palm. Thanks to Hong Gu, three of my nails are in the style of long and alluring. He wrinkled his brow. I let out a tiny smile. Let's see how long you can endure this.

“.....so we were lost in the desert with not enough supplies, so we were doomed.....AY YA!” He suddenly yelped. Because the Princess was listening so intently, his sudden yelp caused her to almost jump out of her seat. I was also startled that my hand shook and I quickly looked at the Princess, afraid to use anymore strength.

The Princess worriedly asked “What happened?” Huo Qu Bing continued to hold my hand tightly without releasing it “It felt like an evil hard-hearted scorpion bit me.” The Princess wanted to get up and I quickly explained this room was thoroughly cleaned for her arrival and there was no possibility of any animal being inside.

The Princess looked scared and disbelieving, so I shot Huo Qu Bing a look, asking him to smooth this over, and gave him a tiny pinch on the hand. Huo Qu Bing laughed “Oh, it appears that I accidentally poked myself.” The Princess relaxed and said “You’re so touchy feeling, not sure who you resemble. So what happened next?”

He continued to tell the story, but I was a bellyful of anger. I wanted to do it again, but the second my nails moved, he yelled out “Deadly snake!” I quickly retracted my nails. The Princess quizzically asked “What?” He said in all seriousness “In the desert there are deadly snakes, deadly ants, deadly bees, all of which like to bit people. But if you yell out they won’t dare to bit anymore.” She looked confused but nodded her head. He continued his story and I decided to give up. In this situation I ought to let him win and do what he wants. He relaxed his grip on me and was just lightly holding my hand.

When he finished, the Princess asked me “So you are saying that she choreographed this performance just to get your attention?” He replied “Indeed so” and then shot me a look with was filled with warning and intensity. His hand also tightened on mine. It truly hurt and I quickly replied “Your humble citizen, I was too daring and bold, will the Princess please punish me.” His eyes grew gentle and his grasp relaxed. He asked the Princess “Everything happened because of Qu Bing, so will Princes Auntie please forgive Qu Bing this once.”

The Princess looked at him, and then looked at me, and then she smiled. “Fine, get up now! I never intended to berate Jin Yu, and I can’t control what’s going on between you two. You didn’t have to busy yourself doing this, though I did enjoy hearing the story. And this is the first time I’ve heard of a human living with wolves.”

Huo Qu Bing looked confident as he explained to the Princess that there are lots of stories in the recorded annals of humans communicating with animals. The Princess laughed “Oh yes, your uncle’s trusty war horse appears to understand your uncle. When your uncle has time he even personally washes the horse down and talks to it like an old friend. Your uncle seems to spend more time with it than with me.”

I tried pulling my hand back, and this time he didn’t resist, only giving me a small squeeze before letting go. I bow in gratitude to the Princess and he also gets up and gives her a bow. He sits down next to the Princess again and she looks at him “Last year you said you were going hunting in the mountains, when in truth you went to Xi Yu. If your uncle found out, what’ll happen?”

Huo Qu Bing huffed “The Emperor approved, so who dares berate me?” The Princess gets up and turns to me “I’m done watching the performance, and listening to the story, I’m ready to return now.” After I send the Princess off and turn back, Huo Qu Bing looks at me but I ignore him and walk off. He chases after me and we return to the same room where I entertained the Princess. I sit where the Princess sat and don’t say a word. He sits down next to me in silence as well. Suddenly he lays down and puts one leg on the seat “How does it feel?”

“A little tired, every word must be carefully thought through before saying it. But I also can’t respond too slowly. And all the kneeling is making my knees ache.”

He smiled “And yet you still dressed up like this? Thank goodness I heard about the Princess coming and rushed over here. Or else you might get scared half to death.”

I tell him that he's over thinking this matter. He suddenly sat up and gave me a cold smile "I'm over thinking? When the Princess presents you (as a present) to the Emperor, that is the path where there is no return." I smile back "What if there is something better" He startles "Who? There is a girl in this dancing house that hasn't shown her face yet?"

I thank him for what he did today, asking if he would berate me if someone from my dancing house entered the Palace. He smiled lightly "My Aunt (Empress Wei) is an already wilted flower in the eyes of the Emperor. She's already selecting ladies for his court, as is everyone in the Palace. If it's not you, someone else is thinking the same thing. The Princess is also looking for possibilities. When the Emperor visits the Princess, she always summons the most beautiful dancers. Some have caught his eyes, but after a few times serving the Emperor have been tossed aside and forgotten. There is a song about women who aspire to be Wei Zhi Fu (the name of Empress Wei). But how many women out there are actually as beautiful as Wei Zhi Fu was in her prime."

I respond "There is definitely not many women who have the Great General Wei as a brother and you as a nephew, that's for sure." He laughed and raised his palms "Don't count me in there. In General Wei's eyes, I'm just a giant block of wood that takes too long to mold. I'm sure he'd rather disown me if he could."

I smile at him "Are you one?" He asks "Do you think I am?" I didn't answer and instead ask why he told the Princess about my wolf background, what if I'm treated as a freak and locked away? He explains that was he the only one who saw me with Brother Wolf, he would have kept it a secret. But there were others with him that day, and the Emperor already knows, so it's best to come clean now with the Princess. I nod.

He orders me "Feed me some fruit." I put the plate in front of him "You feed yourself! I'm not one of the maids in your estate." He laughs and grab my hand "If my estate had one like you, why would I come here to experience your temper." I push his hand away "There is no one here right now, do you want to test your skills against mine?" He sighs and lays back down "You sure know how to ruin the mood."

I huff “Is this how you are in your own estate, flirting with the maids?” He smiles at me “Why don’t you come back to my estate with me and spend a few nights, then you’ll know.” I humph at him and don’t spar with him any further.

He asks me to bring that beauty over to check her out, whether she’s worth our time. “Our?” I say with a raised brow. “Why not?” he responds. I tell him that I think this is best done through the Princess. He laughs and agrees, plus he has no interest in helping find a new ladylove for the Emperor.

He explains “I just like saying “our” and “us”.....us, us, us....not you or I, but us, us.....” I tell him to stop it. He ignores me and keeps saying “Us, us.....” until I grab a fruit and shove it in his mouth. He doesn’t get angry and instead smiled at me and started chewing.

I stand up “Who has time to waste with you, I’ve got other things to take care of.” He also gets up “I’m off as well.” I smile at him “Don’t want to come with me to see the beauty?” He jokingly asks “Do you see me as someone enamored by feminine charm?” I stop for a moment, and then shake my head.

With a smirk, he leaves me with this “If I want to become powerful, why should I do these tactics. It’s not that I don’t understand, it’s that I don’t want to bother. If you think it’s fun then go ahead and do it, but be careful and don’t get yourself entangled in it.” He turns and strolls out of the room in one powerful swirl.

.....

Everyone gathers in my room with a solemn and depressed air, thinking it’s all over now that we can’t perform the dance and we got the Princess mad. I tell them not to worry. We can perform other dances, and now that word has gotten out that the Princess praised “Hua Yue Nong” as a good performance, the customers will surely come in droves to see our talent. I explain to Hong Gu that the Princess is not mad, if she were, she would have shut us own right from the start instead of waiting until now.

But this performance is still her life story, so it's time to stop it. Now there will always be the legend swirling about this performance, with those who have seen it spreading the word, and those who have not lamenting the missed chance. The Princess has gotten her objective across, and so have we.

A maid enters with a small porter bearing a present, a cage covered in black cloth. Supposedly it was brought by a man who didn't leave a name, only saying that I will know who it is from when I see it. I pull off the cloth and there they sit, snow white feathers and red ruby eyes. One is napping and the other is looking at me curiously with a cocked head. I gleefully ask for seeds to be brought over. I smile like a silly person and won't tell Hong Gu who it is from, so she leaves me to bathe in my happiness.

The sleeping pigeon wakes up now there is food and steals a seed from the other one, which doesn't get mad and allows it to take the seed. "You are quite a precocious (Tao Qi) one, so I'll call you Xiao Tao. And you are so giving (Qian Rang) so I'll call you Xiao Qian. I doubt you understand me. I can only speak wolf, not pigeon."

After dinner I rush over to the Shi Estate, deciding whether to go via the front door or over the walls. The door opens and Shi Buo pokes his head out, explaining Jiu Ye wanted the door left open for me. I rush to the Bamboo Residence, where the bamboo blinds are half pulled. With a twirl I've entered the residence without even touching the blinds. Jiu Ye compliments me on my athletic prowess but I'm embarrassed at being so overeager.

I sit down next to him "Thank you for giving me the pigeons. I really like them. Do they have names, because I already gave them one." He replied "Just numbers, so what did you name them?"

"The bossy and precocious one is called Xiao Tao, and the gentle and giving one is called Xiao Qian." He smiled "Then that makes you Xiao Yu." I respond "Yes! The next time I introduce you, I'll call you Xiao Jiu."

He smiles and hands me a small whistle "The pigeon trainer says

those two are the most talented of all the pigeons he's trained in years. He never showed his face in front of them so they didn't imprint on him. In the next month or so, only you can feed them. Once they imprint on you, you don't even need a cage anymore."

I look at the intricate whistle, which has a carving of a pair of pigeons flying on it. It has a tiny hole to string a line through to hang around the neck. I try blowing and it makes an ear piercing screeching noise. He tells me this is a special whistle just for pigeons and they will recognize different sounds as different commands. I ask if he'll teach me?

He replied "Since I gave you the pigeons, how can I refuse to teach you." He grabs another whistle and proceeds to blow. I hold my ears expecting a shrill noise but instead it's a simple playful ditty he plays. After he finishes, he demonstrates all the sounds the whistle can make, showing me and asking me to practice.

Outside the window, a warm breeze wafts into the room. Inside, one is teaching and one is learning, the laughter mixed with work.

An unknown flower scent comes into the room, twirling round the two of us happy people.

My heart feels like it's in motion, this tightening and contracting, holding me in its thrall. When our eyes touch, it's like there is something, but nothing is said.

This tipsy feeling, like the joy of getting drunk, makes the heart unwilling to care and wanting to continue to descend deeper into this sensation.

Chapter 7: Background Identity

I'm playing with the inkbrush in my hand when Xiao Tao swoops in from outside and directly lands on my hand. I tried to pull back but the ink still spills on my sleeve. Xiao Qian lightly lands on the window and gives Xiao Tao a knowing look, and shoots me a sympathetic one.

I angrily grab Xiao Tao's neck "What number outfit is this? What number? Today I'm going to turn your snowy cuteness into a black crow." I grab the inkbrush and get more ink to brush on Xiao Tao, who flaps his wings and cries desperately. Xiao Qian appears torn, not sure if he should help so he coo'd a few times, then put his head under his wings so he doesn't need to watch anymore.

Xiao Tao appears to understand that I am genuinely angry this time, so he stops struggling and allows me to brush ink on him. I painted a large part of his body black before releasing him.

The sound of clapping comes from the door "What an exciting show, picking on a pigeon." Huo Qu Bing stands by the door and is thoroughly amused.

I angrily reply "I pick on him? Why don't you ask him how he picks on me daily? Food and clothing, there is not a single item he hasn't destroyed." As I was complaining, Xiao Tao suddenly spread his wings and gave his body a big shake before flying outside. When I react and lean my body backwards, my face feels this cold splash like a thousand drops of ink sprayed on my face.

"Xiao Tao! I'm going to braise you!" My raging screams are accompanied by Huo Qu Bing laughing. Flying out the window, that "crow" has become a black spot in the sky.

I turn around and use a handkerchief to wipe my face, with Huo Qu Bing behind me still laughing "I've seen it all, trying to hide is a little too

late.”

I hollered “Get out! Who said you could come in?”

He laughingly walked out, and I thought he was leaving, but from the yard came the sound of water being fetched. In a short while, he comes back in and hands me a clean handkerchief. I silently take it from him. Once I felt clean, I turned around “Thanks.” He looked at me and pointed to his ears. I grabbed the handkerchief and wiped there. He then pointed to his forehead and I wiped, then he pointed to his nose and I wiped. I suddenly stopped and stared at him. His shoulders were shaking with silent laughter. I threw the handkerchief at him and stood up angrily “You should go hang out with Xiao Tao, you two would suit perfectly.”

He asked with a laugh “Where are you going. I haven’t discussed with you the serious matters.” I shot back “Going to change.”

When I return to the study, he’s flipping through the books on the shelf. When he hears me, he turns “Ms. Jin, are you looking to become a female general?” I snatch back my hand copied “Sun Zi War Tactics” and return it to the bookshelf. “Touching things without an owner’s permission is a shady thing to do.”

“I’m not a gentleman, and you’re not a lady. We’re a perfect match.”

I’m about to retort when Li Yan arrives, but she turns when she sees I have someone with me. I ask her to come, and when she walks over, Huo Qu Bing stares at her but doesn’t say anything. I give him a glance “Do you need a handkerchief to wipe your drool?” He keeps staring but his lips turn up in a smirk “I can control myself still, no need.”

Li Yan gives me a courtesy but looks questioningly at me. Before I can speak, Huo Qu Bing coldly orders “Take your veil off.”

She gives him an icy look while I hurry to explain who he is. The name Huo Qu Bing flows from my lips when she gives me a shocked look

and turns to assess him. She gives him a courtesy and gives me one last look to see if I'm making any movements, before taking off her veil. Huo Qu Bing stares at her in an extremely rude way and then says "You can leave!" She puts on her veil, gives him a courtesy, and leaves.

I ask "As pretty as the Empress when she first met the Emperor?"

He touches his chin lightly "I don't remember Aunt's looks during her prime, but it's likely on par. This is less important though. What's rare is her demeanor was right on point. She was elegant even in a disadvantageous situation, when I was rude to her she didn't grow shocked, angry, or anxious. She was steely within her femininity. Stronger than you actually!" I coldly huff without responding.

He wonders "When are you planning to send her into the Palace."

I shake my head "I don't know. I have some doubts in my mind. If she can't give me an acceptable response, I don't want to get involved in her business."

He laughed "You slowly think it through. Be careful not to get your trump card stolen. Her looks are extraordinary, but the world is vast. First there was Chen Ah Jiao (one of the Great Beauties), next came Empress Wei, and after the Empress Wei is her. You can't predict that there isn't another woman in Chang An as beautiful as her."

I chuckled then ask "You said you came here to discuss serious matters. What?"

"What happened between you and Shi Enterprises?" I answered "We went our own ways." He reminded me "Shi Enterprises may not as be powerful as it used to be, but it's still prominent in Chang An. If you are a lone tree now, be careful that when a tree grows too large it will attract the wind."

I smile "That's why I want align with the Princess!"

He asks “How big do you want to grow the business?” I thought and then shook my head “I don’t know, one step at a time I guess.”

He shared some information with me “Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises is an interesting person. Supposedly his mother was a good playmate of the Emperor when they were kids. The Emperor has even held him as a baby. But now he refuses to enter the Palace. Every time he is summoned he refuses. There are few in Chang An who have seen him. One of these days I’d like to meet him.”

My heart felt odd and I opened my mouth, but then closed it and swallowed what I wanted to say. I looked outside and didn’t continue the conversation.

After I walked Huo Qu Bing out, I went to see Li Yan. Along the way I pass Fang Ru’s residence where she is playing the flute, and as a newbie she’s already better than I am. Suddenly the flute stopped playing. From Li Yan Nian’s residence came the sound of the lute, and then the flute started back up. I looked between the two residences and smiled.

Li Yan welcomes me and asks for an explanation. I wanted Huo Qu Bing to see how she stacked up with the Great Beauties, then I ask her to explain to me about her past. If she wants to enter the Palace and needs my help, I don’t want to be used and fooled. She pretends not to understand me, so I laugh and ask to see her hand because I understand a bit of hand reading.

I take her right hand “Lots of lines, a very complicated mind prone to overthinking. The criss-crossing pattern shows the mind is often conflicted, but one line goes ahead, revealing the desire to pursue a goal at all costs. One of your parents is likely Han...” She tries to pull her hand away but I continue “Pursuing a lonely path, vengeance in the heart, the turn upwards to fly high.”

She asks “How did I reveal myself?” I point out “Your eyes are beautiful with lush lashes that are naturally curly, with very white fair skin, and a dance that has its unique flavor.” She doesn’t think it’s that odd. I tell

her that only people who grew up in the desert appreciate green nature, which is a life source in the desert. It's all my conjecture, of course.

I continue – she knew I set up “Hua Yue Nong” to make friends with the Princess and she purposely came here for that, which means she wants to enter the Palace. Her brother doesn't seem like the greedy type to sell his sister to the Emperor for riches. The Palace is a horrid place with thousands of women vying for the Emperor's attention, and she is clearly not stupid. Why would she single-mindedly want to go there? She doesn't appear to covet riches either. So the only answer is “vengeance” But I can't understand why she, with her intelligence and thoughtfulness, she can't work this out in her heart. At the age of sixteen, she is at her first blush of beauty, but her eyes are so cold. I found out from her second brother Li Guan Li that her father pampered her but her mother was strangely very strict with her. That means she grew up relatively happy, so where did this vengeance come from?

She explains that her mother was a Han, and they grew up in the Central Plains, but her mother never thought of herself as a Han, and made Li Yan also feel the same way. She gives her real last name, which is a Luo Lan last name. She asks if I am familiar with Xi Yu territory and it's kingdoms. I nod, Xi Yu has 36 different kingdoms and tribes, including Luo Lan, et. al.

Luo Lan is situation right outside the Yu Men Gate, which makes it at a critical juncture. If the Han want to attack the Xiong Nu, or the Xiong Nu want to attack the Han, passing through Luo Lan is a must. The culture of Luo Lan is closer to the Xiong No so it has always aligned with them. But the current Han Emperor refuses to allow Xiong Nu to block the Han's westward expansion so has set out to align with the Xi Yu kingdoms, with Luo Lan being the first to be persuaded to change sides. Papa used to tell me the exploits of the Han Emperor and how he set out to make new allies one by one and succeeded. Papa would get excited and say that the Han conquering the Xiong Nu was just a matter of time.

The same story as told by Jiu Ye turned into something more. In passing through Luo Lan, there was a very dangerous and deadly desert region. The Han Emperor demanded the Luo Lan King provide assistance

to the Han conveys. But the Han conveys constantly abused their Luo Lan guides, so the Luo Lan King decided to refuse to comply with the Han Emperor's request. In a fury, the Han Emperor had the Luo Lan King assassinated. Stuck between the Han and the Xiong Nu, Luo Lan was between a rock and a hard place, If either side got angry, Luo Lan would suffer. In order to keep the peace, Luo Lan even had to send one of its princes to the Han dynasty and another to the Xiong Nu as pawns.

The other Xi Yu kingdoms all have the same fates, trying to survive while stuck between two warring giants. One wrong move and they are wiped out. When Jiu Ye told me this story, while he acknowledged the Emperor's vast conquering strategy, in his voice was more pity for the Xi Yu kingdoms.

Li Yan tells me she knows what she is doing. From the moment she was born, she came with her mother's hatred of the Han. Her mother's master, and also Li Yan's birth father, was a Luo Lan man who once refused the unreasonable demands of a Han envoy. In rage, the Han envoy had her father whipped and then tortured to death. Her mother escaped, though she was pregnant with Li Yan at that time. She met a traveling musician and married him, becoming his second wife and mother to his sons. When Li Yan was small, her mother took her back to where her father was tortured and died to pay their respects to him.

"She pointed to a spot in the desert, telling me this was where father was whipped, and this is where father was buried alive. How father slowly died, mother will never forget the image of father buried in the sand by the Hans. A handsome young man who eventually shriveled up into a dried up human being the size of a child. Her descriptions were vivid and I felt like I could see what happened back then. I had nightmares every night and would wake up in tears. Mother laughed and said that was father's vengeance. Year after year, mother took me back to Luo Lan, telling me never to forget."

While Li Yan's eyes fill with tears, she's smiling and I tell her not to smile. "Mother would not let me cry. Never cry. Mother said that tears would not save me. I can only smile, I can smile." I asked if Li Yan Nian knew her background, She says they don't. When her mother married her

step father, she lavished all her love on Li Guan Li as an outlet for the guilt she felt towards her birth father.

I paced, wondering what to do. We all have hate, but my Papa only wanted me to be happy, whereas Li Yan's mother only wants her to get revenge. The sun is setting and the birds are returning, accompanied by the sounds of the lute playing, I lean against the window and look outside.

"Li Yan, I suggest the smartest thing is for you to forget this all. Your mother is your mother, she cannot force her vengeance on you. She was not a good mother, using her pain to torment you. If your birth father was a good man deserving of a woman's love, then he would want what brings you happiness and not for you to struggle your entire life in hatred. If you choose revenge, then your life is over before it even begins. Because the target is the Han Emperor, so by default it is the entire Han Empire. The price for your revenge is your entire life, you will never find your own happiness."

She thanked me "It isn't just for revenge, I am also the daughter of Luo Lan, with love towards Luo Lan. I am proud of being a Luo Lan person. We may not have the riches and etiquette of the Han, but we have our plains, laughter, and warm embrace."

I continue "We don't have warm houses but we can see where the sky and earth touch. We don't have wide streets but we can race our horse anytime."

She responds "The world is so vast, and we just want a piece of land where we can herd sheep and sing songs. Why won't the Han dynasty stop tormenting Luo Lan, give us a chance to live?"

I tell her that the "Tao Te Jing" (Ethics and Morality Manual) tells us that there is no permanence in this world and things will disappear in time. One day there will be no Han dynasty or Luo Lan.

She retorts "I won't argue these principles with you. Let me ask you.

If a young man is about to be killed, will you say to him ‘If you don’t die at 40, you’ll die at 50, if you don’t die at 50 you’ll die at 60. Since you’re going to die anyway, why struggle, just let yourself get killed now.’”

She asks for my help. I tell her she’ll get into the Palace regardless of my help, but she believes going through me is the best way. I agree, though I don’t know what she is thinking. If she tries to assassinate the Emperor, it doesn’t solve anything since there is already a Crown Prince, plus we would all get punished along with her. She smiles, that is not her way. She doesn’t know martial arts and this is not a long term solution.

I shrug “I suppose it’s curiosity. I don’t have a side I stand with, so I can support whatever I want.” She can tell I have agreed to assist and her eyes grow red-rimmed. She has never shared her thoughts with anyone, and thanks me for listening to her, it made her feel much better.

I ask her what the heck is going on between Li Yan Nian and Fang Ru, and she laughs, blaming me since I asked them to create a new song together. She goes to peek but I don’t follow since I don’t want to be a third wheel.

I go back to Hong Gu’s quarters and she hands me a handkerchief, needing to talk to me. The handkerchief is worn after many washes, and instead of being embroidered with the usual flowers or leaves, instead it has a vine along the side that formed the character Li. It was beautifully done and seductive.

Hong Gu explains that the third young master Li (name Li Gan) found it in the courtyard and wants to know who it belongs to. She knew it was likely Li Yan’s but didn’t know what I was planning so told him she would find out,.

Hong Gu follows with more “The third young master Li is the son of General Li Guang, one of the highest officials in court. Even though he was born of such high standing, he’s nothing like young master Huo. He has no arrogance, but his martial arts prowess and scholarly learnings are one of the most accomplished among the young men of Chang An. With the war

with the Xiong Nu, he has a bright future ahead of him. Just by looking at a handkerchief with the word “Li” embroidered on it has made Li Gan head over heels for Li Yan, if he ever saw her face, he might as well give his soul to her.

Initially I wanted to return the handkerchief to Li Yan and tell her what happened, but I changed my mind and kept it, telling Hong Gu to find some random girl named Li and tell Li Gan that the handkerchief belongs to her.

Hong Gu stares at me “I can’t figure out what you guys are doing. Your actions towards Li Yan indicate that you want to make her famous, but thus far you haven’t done anything. And if the third young master Li isn’t even good enough for her, it’s hard to find a better option in Chang An.” She proceeds to eat but keeps staring at me “You two....you two....”.

It’s late and Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian still haven’t returned. I’m about to get impatient when suddenly Xiao Qian returns bearing a cloth wrapped around his leg. I smile and take the cloth where small characters are written on it.

“What mess did Xiao Tao get into? How did he become a black crow? You guys fight and I’m the one who suffers. I wore a white robe today and Xiao Tao landed on me. Even though he was half dry already, he was still dirty and my white robe was completely ruined. Now it needs to be thoroughly cleaned. I heard your throat wasn’t feeling well yesterday? Did you boil water accordingly to my recommendation?”

I take out an already cut handkerchief and write “Don’t spoil him, he’s not even afraid of me now. The littlest infraction and he’ll run away. My throat is much better. It’s just that the medicine is bitter so the second time around I didn’t put as much in.” I secured the cloth around Xiao Qian and sent him flying into the sky.

I look down at the ceramic jar in front of me, with gold and silver flower vines intertwined that seem especially pretty in the lamp light. I take a drink of water and take out another cloth to write “After researching in a

book, I learned that the gold and silver flower have another name of “Yuen Yang Teng” (Lover’s Vines). The flowers first bloom white, and then turn yellow, which creates this gold and silver contrast. The flowers always remain intertwined, never leaving each other. I decide to help Li Yan, because her mind is set and she’s going to do it regardless. Until I am certain of your [she is addressing Jiu Ye in this diary entry] real identity and intentions, why not have Li Yan owe me one this time. In the future, our goals might be aligned, it might not. Neither of us gave each other any promises. I don’t know if I’m doing the right thing, but my feelings towards Li Yan are complicated. Some grudging respect and some sympathy. And perhaps some disgust at myself. Like someone said to me, she is more capable than me.”

My heart hurts and I finish writing. I put the cloth away and see that I’ve already accumulated so many diary entries. Xiao Qian has returned and I remove another cloth where Jiu Ye has sent another detailed medical recommendation, this time with honey in it to alleviate the bitterness. He tells me Xiao Tao refuses to come home, so likely Xiao Qian will go back to spend the night there. He tells me to go to sleep early.

I tap Xiao Qian’s head “You have no backbone.” He cocked his head at me and I wave my hand “Go find your precious wifey!” and then he takes off.

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I kneel and bow before the Princess who tells me to rise and asks why I am here. I explain I wanted the Princess’ guidance. There is a woman whose looks far surpass mine, with elegance in dance, intelligence and wit, and a melodic voice. The Princess laughs, knowing that I am running four dancing houses, so for me to praise a woman like this means she really is special.

I explain that she is the younger sister to the musician Li Yan Nian and has her brother’s talent. The Princess orders me to bring her. I bow and ask the Princess for more time, I am preparing a jade carefully before unveiling it. She naturally wonders why I told her this early then?

I tell her that a good war tactician needs to announce the battle in advance to prepare. I am just preparing the weapon, but it is up to the Princess to set the stage. She replies “You are so forthright, reminding me a bit of Huo Qu Bing.”

“Your highness is wise and thoughtful. I don’t need to beat around the bush and hide, which would only make the Princess think less of me.”

She thinks and asks “I heard that the money you used to buy the dancing houses, half of it was borrowed from the girls who work at the dancing houses. In your promissory note, you promised to repay it all – one year, with an interest of 20%, within two years with an interest of 50%.”

I reply that I couldn’t find so much money right away but couldn’t let this great business opportunity pass by, so this was my last resort.

She gives me an assessing look. “This last resort move was brilliant. Luo Yu House is doing booming business, and the other dancing girls who see this would be eager to bet their money on you. The word profit unites a pile of loose sand so that everyone is now aligned with you. Once you have everyone’s heart on your side, that is already half way to success. You can go now! Seeing how you handle things, I know you will not disappoint me. I wait to meet this beautiful jade of yours.”

Chapter 8: Shocking Encounter

Outside is thunder and pouring rain, inside we sit and I stare at Li Yan “I’ve already met with the Princess, so in the shortest time necessary, you will have to do everything I ask.” She nods. I point to all the books and ask her to read and understand the tactical manuals. She will be in the Palace and engaging in political intrigue with the Emperor and all the other women. The Emperor ascended to the throne at the age of sixteen, and today is thirty six years old. A man at the pinnacle of his life must be well versed in battle and wits. He is sometimes cold, sometimes warm.

Li Yan looks at the books “Since the Emperor is my enemy, but also my one ally in the Palace, our battle is between a man and a woman. I’ve never been intimate with a man before. In this battle, if I lose my heart first, I will have lost, right?”

I point to the anatomy texts and she wrinkled her nose that it sounds like trying to probe the innards of the Emperor. Hong Gu pipes up that the books we needs are the ones about male-female intimate relations. Li Yan and my cheeks both heat up. She whispers to me “Xiao Yu, have you read it before?”

I haven’t, and those kinds of book are very rare and almost impossible to acquire. Only the Palace with its vast repository might have a copy. Leaving me no choice but to go find Huo Qu Bing.

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“I need to bother you to find a book for me” I keep my head lowered staring at my shoes.

Huo Qu Bing is leaning on the cushion and casually draws “What book? Not yet another military tactical manual?”

I lower my head even more and softly answer “No.”

He asks with a hint of exasperation “What’s wrong with you today? What is the matter that you can’t just come out and say it. Hemming and hawing.”

I take a deep breath and whisper “It’s.....it’s a man and a woman.....man woman.....concerning that.”

“What?” He suddenly sits up straight and stares at me. I keep my head burrowed and stare at the ground, not making a sound. I can feel that even my neck is burning hot, my face must surely be on fire.

He started laughing “What? What is that? I don’t understand what you are saying. You need to be more specific.”

I suddenly stand up “Forget it!”

He grabbed my sleeve and smiled “Is it for you to read or for someone else?”

I don’t dare to turn back and look at him “For someone else.”

He laughed “That kind of book, even the Palace might only have one copy. I’ll have someone hand copy and deliver it to you in a few days. You should read it as well. It’ll come in handy, If there is anything you don’t understand, I can.....” Before he finished talking, I had already jerked my sleeve from his hand and quickly taken off.

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I sit with Li Yan in silence while Hong Gu teases us. She’ll find some of Chang An’s most experienced ladies of the night to come and educate Li Yan personally, She teases that I ought to sit in on the lesson, it’ll sure come in handy someday. Both Li Yan and I are completely red-faced. After Hong Gu leaves, I tell Li Yan to work on her eyes. She doesn’t have the eyes of a sixteen year old without a care in this world. Her eyes are filled

with deep pain that even I could see through, she is clearly not going to be able to convince the Emperor. I want her to go out and observe normal girls and check out the look in their eyes.

I tell her to start crying from now on, despite her mother telling her never to cry, She needs to learn to cry on a dime, and cry prettily and sorrowfully. I proceed to tell her the story of Empress Wei.

“Rumor has it that when the Emperor first brought Wei Zhi Fu into the Palace, the then current Empress refused to relent. So the Emperor had no choice and could not see Wei Zhi Fu for an entire year. When he finally saw her again, she got on her knees and cried and begged the Emperor to release her from the Palace. Today we all know the end of that story. Tears and laughter are tools that she needs to learn how to use it wisely,

I tell her that these are the hard things, the rest is easier. We'll go through the Emperor's life story and get to know his personality. Li Yan gets up and fixes her clothes before kneeling to give me a formal bow. I want to help her up but she grabs my hand “Please accept this bow from me. Because in the future, you will have to be bowing to me. This is the only time I can show my gratitude for what you have done for me.” I accept her bow.

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“The gold silver flower seeds have arrived and I asked the gardener to plant it in my new garden. By Spring time next year it will have bloomed. I want to ask you to come view the flowers with me. Will you come? Should I plant some at the Shi Estate? You treat me so well, always carefully answering my every question. My requests, even if it has nothing to do with Shi Enterprises, you always agree. But exactly where do you put me in your heart? Sometimes I feel you getting closer and closer to me, but when I reach out my hand, you suddenly turn away. Why?.....”

I hold my brush, why do I have to always test and probe his feelings. I put the handkerchief away and walk outside. I ask Li Yan if I can ask Li Yan Nian some questions. As we're walking over, I softly ask how she's

coming along in her studies, She doesn't answer, only telling me to sit in on the lessons if I am so curious. I laugh, telling her I want to learn from the best, so I'll wait for her to finish her education.

She tells me not to spend my days just running the business, I need to worry about my future as well. She can see that the Big Boss treats me well, and the way I am so careful around him, he must be special. If he's not married then..... I cut her off and squeeze her cheeks playfully, telling her that because she's off getting married soon doesn't mean she needs to pull me down with her. She huffs that her good intentions are so wasted on me.

When we arrive, Fang Ru is leaving Li Yan Nian's residence and she quickly explains she came to inquire about a tune. I tease that I didn't even ask, and she's already trying to explain. Li Yan secretly pokes me and lets Fang Ru scurry off. I tease Li Yan for sticking up for her future sister-in-law already. She warns me not to use my jokester attitude on Fang Ru and her brother, who are gentle people.

Li Yan Nian welcomes us inside. I ask how it is in the Palace? Since he was recommended by Princess Pingyang, everyone is very respectful towards him. I heard he's been praised by the Emperor and already rewarded. Li Yan can tell I'm beating around the bush and tells me to cut to the chase.

I drink water and look Li Yan Nian in the face "There is a very introverted person who also loves music. If a girl wants to tell him her feelings, but not sure how he feels and doesn't dare be direct, does Master Li have any suggestions on how the girl can reveal her feelings in a way that is easier to accept?"

He stares and starts to think, while Li Yan starts laughing at me. As someone who has read all the military manuals yet I need to ask for advice on this, she tells me consider the things I said to her, and practice it myself,

I calmly answer Li Yan "I don't consider this a battle, because from the very beginning I had opened my heart. I have no defenses, I'm not

afraid of him coming in. I'm afraid that he won't come in. I have no calm and calculation here, just my heart."

After much thought, Li Yan Nian confessed that he was but a musician and all he knows is how to use music to convey emotion. He heard I played the flute as well, so he suggested that since Li Yan also played, she can teach me since we spend so much time together. Li Yan suddenly took off after looking unhappy, so I gestured for Li Yan Nian to stay while I chased after her.

Finding her alone in the room, looking out the window, her loneliness was palpable. I tell her "You can still change your mind. The worst that can happen is the Princess is upset, but I can resolve that."

She softly replied "I really envy you, to live so free. You can do what you want, and pursue that happiness that you want."

"You're also doing what you want now, no one is forcing you."

"I am forcing myself. Jin Yu, you don't understand, and I hope you never understand what it feels like to force oneself to do something."

I left her alone, and as I was walking back to my room, Xiao Tao landed on my shoulder with a cloth note on his leg. I was so happy I ran to my room.

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I ask the Princess if we can meet in a Bamboo Forest in her residence, sharing with her the understanding that women are like flowers, needing accompaniment to best display their beauty. We arrive right at dusk, so the sky is red-tipped. Li Yan stands next to a bamboo tree with her back to us. I tell the Princess that I did not pose Li Yan this way, or that she even knows the Princess will be meeting her today.

The Princess sighs “How can a person’s back already conjure up all these thoughts. I want to see her face, but am afraid I will be disappointed. Her face cannot disappoint her form. This anxious feeling is indeed something that would not happen had I met her in a room.”

The Princess walks forward and Li Yan hears footsteps and turns around. She has a smile and is pointing to the setting sun, about to say something when she recognizes the Princess and immediately kneels and bows. The Princess has her rise and compliments her simply adorned beauty as such a precious jade that she was loathe to see Li Yan kneeling.

I look at Li Yan, telling her that this is all I can do, the rest is up to her. She understands. Going there was the two of us, returning is just me. The anxious Li Guan Li asks if the Princess likes Li Yan and I confirm it. Li Yan Nian looks thunderous and turns to punch a tree. He wonders if perhaps his biggest regret in life will be coming to Luo Yu House.

“Even though my sister said this is what she wanted, it’s her own idea, but I still can’t help but hate you. You disappoint me. Do you want riches and wealth that much? So much that you won’t hesitate to sacrifice a girl’s future?”

I give a small smile “Hate all you want. Li Yan has already stepped on a path of no return. Rather than object, you need to help her. You need to use all your talent to help her.”

I leave him and go back to my room, telling Hong Gu what happened. For Li Yan to impress the Princess, who has seen countless beauties, is quite a feat. The Princess will be sure to devise the best opportunity to present Li Yan to the Emperor. Sitting there, I suddenly get up and grab the handkerchief with the “Li” embroidered on it. I hold it over the fire until little by little it burns up and the remnants are just black charred bits on the ground. What was before could no longer be distinguished.

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I'm holding an invitation from the Princess to attend her birthday celebration at her estate. Hong Gu thinks it's because the Princess likes Li Yan so much she's extended this invite to us. She wants to dress us, but I tell her to dress herself. I'll wear a nice outfit with a few accessories, that will be enough. I tell her to trust me on this one.

The banquet is situated on the banks of the lake, with lanterns lit illuminating everything. The dais where the guest of honor sits is still empty. We're seated at the very end of the banquet area, where we are promptly ignored by the guests already enjoying the event. Suddenly a silence descends and everyone gets on their knees and bows "Long live your majesty the Emperor. Long live your highness the Empress."

Hidden in the back, I can observe everyone carefully. The Han Emperor that Papa and Yi Zhi Xie often talked about is sitting right in the middle of the banquet. I remember asking Yi Zhi Xie many years ago whether the Emperor was as good looking as Yi Zhi Xie. It is only now, years later, that I have an answer. He is handsome, but not as good looking as Yi Zhi Xie. But his aura was more powerful than Yi Zhi Xie. But then again, the Yi Zhi Xie that I knew was before he became the Shan Yu. Who knows what he's like now?

I looked at the Empress and was stunned. She was like the water, as soft, gentle, flowing and crystal clear as the water. Under the light, she is like a fairy pond under the moonlight, an astonishing beauty. What wilted flower? There is a kind of beauty that never fades or wilts with time.

Hong Gu sighs "That is a woman amongst women. No wonder back then the Emperor went up against the Dowager Queen and the Princess to have her." I nod.

Princess Pingyang is sitting with a large man with a gentle demeanor, who is likely the Great General Wei. He's like the stories say – physically brawn but calm and composed on the inside. He and the Empress just sat there watching the Princess and the Emperor happily chat.

The people on the main dais are all relatives of the Imperial family or

high ranking officials. Everyone appears to be enjoying themselves but their eyes always stray back to the Emperor to follow his mood and his lead. Underneath the guise of getting along, they are trying to gain the Emperor's favor. Only Huo Qu Bing pays attention to his food. He occasionally raises his head but his expression is cold and he doesn't acknowledge others around him. He doesn't socialize with others and they don't socialize with him. Since the banquet started, there was only one twenty some year old young man who raised his glass to toast Huo Qu Bing, who smiled and toasted back.

I find out from Hong Gu that the young man is Li Gan, the third young master of the General Li. I see that she described him correctly before, handsome and dashing, but with an air of confidence being born into a military family. Suddenly the banquet quieted and Li Yan Lian arrived and began to play. After some time, joining the sound of the lute was the sound of a flute rising from the distance. Everyone turned to see where the flute was coming from, and on a small boat sat Li Yan playing the flute. She is veiled but her seductive beauty hidden within is evident to all.

After she bows to the Emperor and the Princess, she suddenly steps off the boat and appears to float on the water. She starts to dance in the moonlight on the surface of the lake, a water fairy come to life. Everyone stares in shock while Li Yan Nian's music hits a crescendo. Li Yan tosses out a long ribbon and starts to dance with it, creating spirals in the air that is in tune with the music. As the eyes follow the ribbon, suddenly Li Yan vanishes, like she went back to the water.

The first to snap out of it was Huo Qu Bing, the Great General Wei, and myself, while everyone is still staring at the lake. I turn to look at the Emperor, while the Great General Wei and Huo Qu Bing immediately look towards the Empress (their sister and aunt, respectively), Empress Wei has a small smile and is still looking at the lake, But within her brows it looks like she's suppressing tears. Li Gan looks amazed, while Li Yan Nian just looks at his lute with an expressionless look.

In this silence the Emperor's voice is heard "Bring this girl to meet me." Hong Gu holds my hand with a smile, while Li Gan's hand shakes and he spills his wine, but he quickly composes himself.

The Emperor and the Princess banter, with her revealing that she had wooden boards built under the lake surface so that Li Yan's would appear to be dancing on water. The banquet finally ends and everyone disperses. We wait until most people have left before we take out leave. Hong Gu looks happy but I can't seem to find the joy in this. Planning something is one thing, seeing it happen is another. The Empress Wei entranced the Emperor years ago by performing a dance for him at the Princess estate. Years later, the same thing has happened again, now by a different woman. When the Emperor saw Li Yan tonight, did he recall Wei Zhi Fu of years ago?

When I was a child I loved banquets, it was always a happy occasion. Even when Papa didn't want to go, I would find a way to attend. Sitting at today's Imperial banquet, I finally see clearly that underneath all the riches and wealth hides a bitter cold. I suddenly miss Papa a lot, and when I'm down the image that comes to mind is Jiu Ye. I want to see his warm figure under the lamp light. One lamp, one person, one warmth. I tell Hong Gu to go home by herself, I want to walk.

Under the moonlight, the occasional dog bark breaks the silence of the night. As I'm walking, a carriage passes by which abruptly stops. Huo Qu Bing jumps out of the carriage and stares at me "What are you doing here? Were you at the Princess' banquet earlier?"

I nod, and he coldly says "Congratulations." I bite down on what I wanted to say and continue walking. He sends the carriage off and quietly walks besides me. I wanted to ask him to leave, but seeing the expression on his face, I can't say anything, so we walk in silence.

The carriage goes far and the night quiets down like we are. On the long street there is only the sound of our footsteps on the ground. He looked ahead and softly said "Some things you can anticipate in advance, but seeing it unfold is a different experience." I tell him to yell at me if it'll make him feel better.

He gave me a sideways glance and with a smile said "If I was mad it's gone now. It's rare to see you so subdued, plus what happened was as

expected. I just didn't expect Li Yan's entrance to be so well thought out, conquering all in one fell swoop. Li Yan understood strategy, first she had Li Yan Nian use a tune to engage the Emperor's attention, then her appearance was both stunning and still secretive. It was a truly exciting performance tonight."

The moon is bright and the light blanketed the entire street, but I can only see the path right in front of me. What is at the end of the lane I cannot clearly see. The first meeting between Li Yan and Liu Che (the name of the Emperor) is both calculated yet uncertain. Li Yan won this round, but what about the future?

We walk in silence, based on the path it appears Huo Qu Bing wants to walk me back to Luo Yu House. We turn into another street where at the end a lantern illuminates the sign "Tian Xiang House". A few people are leaving Tian Xiang House, and the most popular dancers are actually personally sending them off. I check out these customers and my heart lurches. My knees grow weak and I almost collapse on the ground. Huo Qu Bing reaches over to support me, but I'm still staring straight ahead. It's not possible! How could he be here on the streets of Chang An?

He's wearing a Han style outfit, standing straight and proud under the lantern light, a white robe encircled with jade, elegant and refined. Because he is a Xiong Nu, his features are very defined, like a knife blade's sharpness type of handsome. But his demeanor is distant and cold, like a thousand feet of snow, the cold radiating from him. The lantern normally gives off warmth, but around him there is only chill. Surrounded by warm flowers, it's like he's standing all alone on a snowy mountain top, always solitary. So this is what he looks like after becoming the Shan Yu. Between his eyes there is no warmth and softness when once he was the smiling and dashing Lord.

In a blink of an eye I cannot move, cannot speak, just standing there dumbfounded as they walk towards me. Once I react, it's like I'm back in the desert, trying to escape with Yu Dan for our lives, telling me that I need to run and hide. I immediately turn around and look everywhere, but all around me are closed houses with nowhere to hide. I want to run away but Huo Qu Bing grabs my arm "What are you afraid of?"

I hear the footsteps almost to my back, and in a moment of hopelessness and abject fear, I dive into Huo Qu Bing's arms and embrace him, my head buried in his shoulder. He's momentarily stunned, and then his arms slowly encircle me. He whispers in my ear "As long as I am here, no one in Chang An city can hurt you."

A rough laughter breaks the silence, "The girls in Chang An are quite passionate! The carefree nature is like our....Xi Yu girls. That backside looks like....."

Huo Qu Bing makes a move but I squeeze his back, so he retracts his arms.

A soft cough and the man's words trail off. A very familiar yet completely unfamiliar voice speaks up "Young master please forgive us. My servant is careless with his words. He didn't mean any disrespect or insult. Coming from Xi Yu, just a little rough around the edges."

My body continues to shake uncontrollably. He's standing right next to me, I never thought I would ever see him again. I can't believe that, years later, I would reunite with Yi Zhi Xie on the streets of Chang An. If I supposedly make a move, will he die by my hands? Not possible, in this place, with his prowess and current position, his servants must all be martial arts experts. Plus his own skill is the best in all of Xiong Nu. But is it because I can't do it physically, or because I don't want to do it emotionally?

Huo Qu Bing powerfully embraces me, letting me know that he's here to handle this. His voice is cold "You all best scram and disappear from my eyes."

"You rude....."

"Hmmm?" Yi Zhi Xie's light voice immediately silences the others.

A soft playful voice pipes up "My master so graciously apologized

already, but the young master was so rude in return. What a waste of a good looking form.”

Huo Qu Bing grabs me and twirls a few times, and the sound of metal darts hit the ground. Huo Qu Bing is furious and about to push me aside when I continue to embrace him and beg “Let them go, please, please.....”

“Duo Er, what are you doing?” Yi Zhi Xie’s voice sounds calm but underneath I can sense his anger.

Duo Er? And still with the same temper? Mu Da Duo? She is here as well.

Mu Da Duo fakes a laugh “Young master’s skill is quite good! A genuine hero, no wonder you have such a temper. I was wrong, will the young master forgive me.”

In all of Chang An, there is likely no one who would dare to try and injure Huo Qu Bing and afterwards still stand there able to talk. Huo Qu Bing controls his rage and just spits out “Get lost!”

A few cold scoffs are drowned out by Yi Zhi Xie’s one word of “Let’s go.” All I hear are footsteps scurrying away, and in a few moments the street is quiet again, the night returned to normal. But I am covered in cold sweat.

Huo Qu Bing softly said “They’re gone.” I tried to stand straight but my body is limp and I almost slip. He hurries to hold onto me, and my head rests on his shoulders. I make no sound or movement. In a few short moments, I feel like I experienced a life and death battle, my body and soul are exhausted.

He quietly stands there until I raise my head to leave his embrace. He laughs “Done using me so you’re going to toss me aside now?” I force a smile and say “Thank you.” He checks me out from head to toe, holding his chin and giving me an assessing look. He gives a naughty smile “This kind

of assistance is what I am happy to give. A beauty in my embrace is a great joy. But next time, it won't be a simple "thank you" that will be enough to dismiss me. I'll want a more substantive response."

I bend down to look for the fallen metal darts "Who was thanking you for the embrace? I was thanking you for not asking me who they were."

"If you want to tell me, if I don't ask you'll tell me. But if you want to bury your past, you will never explain. I know only the Jin Yu that I know." Huo Qu Bing crouched on the ground to help me look.

I startled, looking at him, but he merely lowered his head to keep searching "There is one over here." As he reached out to grab it, I immediately say "Don't use your hand."

Taking out a handkerchief from my shirt, I gently pick up the metal dart. After examining it carefully, I confirm that it belongs to Mu Da Duo. It appears that she is doing well. All these years later, I am no longer the me of the past, whereas her personality remains the same.

"Trying to hurt someone due to a verbal tussle, and it's poisonous?" Huo Qu Bing stares at the metal dart with his face dark and stern.

I shake my head, trying to explain "It's not poison. She just loves to make mischief. It's just coated with something to make a person itch. If you were hit, you wouldn't die, but you'll be painfully itchy."

Huo Qu Bing looks suspicious "No man would be that pointless, so it's a girl? No wonder her voice was a bit odd." I nod my head.

After Huo Qu Bing brings me back to the house and is about to bid me farewell, I just stand there staring at him. It's just so hard to explain. After awhile, seeing that I'm not going to talk, he gently says "Relax. That man had an extraordinary demeanor. His servants are also not ordinary. They are clearly not ordinary foreign merchants. But I won't dispatch anyone to investigate their background." I gratefully bowed to him and turn to go

inside when he calls me with a soft voice “If anything happens you have to come find me. Remember that you are not alone in Chang An.”

His eyes show the warmth inside and I look at him for awhile. The anxiety in my heart slowly melts away. I vigorously nod my head and give him a bright smile. “Sleep well.” I watch him leave until he disappears from sight, before I go inside.

It is the dark of night but I don’t feel like sleeping. I hold a cup and stare at the light, watching the wax slowly melt away. It feels like each drop is burning into my heart.

Why is Yi Zhi Xie in Chang An? What is his purpose? To find allies? It’s like life cannot be anticipated, right when I thought I had thoroughly buried my past, in the sudden illumination of a lantern light I see him again. Papa, I promised you not to go find Yi Zhi Xie, that I would do my best to forget the Xiong Nu, and I have arrived in the Han dynasty. But why did he re-appear in the streets of the Han dynasty?

Chapter 9: Heart Song

Normally I would send someone to Tian Xiang House to find out where Yi Zhi Xie went. But the normally thorough me did not do that, instead choosing to stay in and go out less. I practice my flute or play games with the girls. Am I purposely avoiding and forgetting? Even with so many years that pass, I'm still afraid to face it. With these thoughts, I keep playing a tune that explains my confusion.

A voice rang from outside the window "I didn't want to bother you until you finished that tune, but why does it go on forever?" as he rapped the door.

I lower the flute "Door is not locked, come in." Huo Qu Bing opened the door and entered, picking up the flute to twirl it around "What were you playing just now? It sounded familiar, but I can't seem to place it."

I'm glad he doesn't pay attention to these things and release a pent up breath. I take back the flute and put it back in the box "What do you want?" He looked at me carefully "To see how you are doing?" I raise my spirits and give him a laugh "I'm fine." He asks "Hiding in the house all day long is fine?" I stare at the table "I feel like not going out."

He suddenly sticks his head in front of my face, eyes pinning mine as he asks "Were those books you asked me for, meant for Li Yan?" He changed the subject so quickly it took me a second to register, before turning my head and answering yes.

He softly whispers in my ear "Did you read it?" His warm breath against my ear causes my face to turn red, and in my sudden nervousness, I shove him away. He touches his chin and stares at me, grinning, and his stares makes me uncomfortable all over. I jump off the pallet "I have things to do, you hurry up and leave."

He slowly stood up "A woman's mood changes faster than the desert

weather. It was sunny just a minute ago and now it's blanket by sand and storm."

I open the door without a word and stare at him, indicating he needs to go. His expression hardens and he coldly walks past me. As I'm closing the door, he turns back "Your frigid expression makes a person's insides tingle." I glare at him and shut the door with a bang.

As I'm thinking angry thoughts about Huo Qu Bing, suddenly there is a rap at the door. I ask "Why are you back?" and Hong Gu responds "Where else should I be if not here?"

I laugh and open the door "I was just so annoyed at someone and my anger isn't directed at you." She's happy to see me lively again after being so down and mooney for the last few days. I startle, having been annoyed by Huo Qu Bing, I was so busy being upset that most of my anxiety these past few days have mostly dissipated. Did he.....did he do it on purpose?

Hong Gu and I walk and discuss new business opportunities when suddenly there is a young man harassing a dancer in the courtyard. Hong Gu and I try to intervene, and when the man turns around and sees me, he orders me to halt since I've already turned to leave.

I pretend not to hear and rush off. She rushes to my side and grabs my arms, but I shake her off and take off sprinting. She cries behind me in Xiong Nu language "Big sister Yu Jin, I know it's you, I know it's you....." As she talks her voice is already a woman's voice filled with tears.

I stop but still don't turn around. She walks up to me and takes a deep breath "It's just me here goofing off, the Shan Yu is not here." I turn and face her, the two of us assessing the other person. We don't talk, and Hong Gu takes the dancer and they quickly leave.

"Why are you still the same way? Behaving so boldly in Chang An? Deciding to harass a lady?" I ask with a laugh. Mu Da Duo suddenly grabs

me and starts crying “They are said you were dead. They all said you were dead. I cried for an entire year. Why did Yu Dan swear to the Heavens until the day he died that you were dead?”

I thought I was strong, but my eyes fill with tears, so I bite my lips not to let it fall. “Yu Dan, Yu Dan....you saw him before he died?”

Mu Da Duo cries and nods “The Shan Yu didn’t believe you were dead in the beginning. He knew how close we were as kids, so he sent me to go search for you. But Yu Dan told me that you died, and he buried your corpse in the desert.” I hand her a handkerchief but am too afraid to ask what happened after Yu Dan was captured.

“Big sister, are you a dancer here? How much money will it take to buy your freedom?” Mu Da Duo asks as she wipes her tears. “This house is mine, I run it.” I give her a warm smile.

Mu Da Duo hits her forehead and laughs “I’m so stupid. No one in this world can force big sister to do what she doesn’t want to do.”

I have a slight smile but don’t laugh out loud, so Mu Da Duo’s smile disappears. She grows somber “Big sister, the Shan Yu did not kill Yu Dan. Yu Dan got sick and died.”

I coldly laugh “Got sick and died? Is that what happened? Yu Dan played with us since we were kids, has he ever been sick or weak? As a joke we once pushed him in the lake in the dead of Winter, causing us to catch a cold, but he was perfectly fine.”

Mu Da Duo continues to hurriedly explain “Big sister, it’s true. If the Shan Yu wanted to kill Yu Dan, he could have done it when he captured him. But the Shan Yu gave strict orders to capture you guys alive. Otherwise why would you guys be chased for days and nights on end? And you don’t know, but when the Shan Yu learned that you guys were injured during the pursuit, he was so furious that his face turned white. I have never seen the Shan Yu that angry before, which frightened the entire army

of warriors to get on their knees. The Shan Yu refused to believe that you were dead, he kept questioning Yu Dan over and over again about how you supposedly died. But Yu Dan's explanation was so believable. The Shan Yu flipped the entire Xi Yu territory upside down but he couldn't find you. All the roads leading to the Han were manned by extra guards, but no one saw someone like you. So later we believed what Yu Dan said."

I coldly reply "I don't care about this. Even if Yu Dan died of a sickness, but my Papa and Yu Dan's mom, don't tell me they killed themselves? Who caused all of this? Even if he didn't kill them, they died because of him."

Mu Da Duo's tear fall and she shakes her head "Big sister, I don't understand why Teacher would kill himself. The Shan Yu kept trying to convince the Teacher to stay and assist him. If Teacher refused, he can ask the Shan Yu to let him go, so why did he kill himself? That day I had just gone to sleep when I heard a commotion, someone screaming "The former Queen has killed herself." A few moments later, another shout "Teacher has killed himself." I was thinking of big sister so I didn't even go see the former Queen and went to see Teacher, crying and running there. I saw the Shan Yu running out, not even wearing shoes since he had just laid down to rest. He was barefoot in the snow, and when he saw Teacher's body, his knees almost buckled and fell on the ground. Everyone was so frightened and tried to assist him, but he ordered everyone back. He stayed by Teacher's body for the entire night. Big sister, when the Shan Yu amassed his own army and became a self-annointed Shan Yu, I initially really hated him, hated that he stole Yu Dan's place. But that night, I saw him lonely in that tent. It was snowing outside and we were all cold even by a fire, but he was inside just wearing one thin robe, not moving until sunrise. There was no happiness in his eyes, only sadness and pain. It was cold out, but his heart was even colder. I snuck a peek at him from outside and stopped hating him at that moment. I felt like he must have had a reason to do what he did. And I really believe that he is more suited to be our Shan Yu than Yu Dan was. This is all what I personally saw, I'm not lying to big sister. Later the Shan Yu, despite the protests of the officials, ordered a Han funeral for the Teacher."

An enormous pain ate at my heart and I clutch my chest. I close my

eyes and remember hearing the news of Papa's death near the Bang Lian Mountain. It was that painful then, like my heart was being eaten alive, and today that scene comes right back to me.

After Yu Dan left me, I didn't go to the Central Plains like I promised Papa. I hid in the wolf pack, and tried to find a way to get close to Papa. With the help of the wolves, I avoided detection time and again. I thought I could reach Papa and I can take him with me. But as I was about to see Papa, I heard the news of his death.

It had been snowing for three days and three nights already, the snow to my knees. But the snow wouldn't stop falling. It was white, the world was white. Yu Dan was dead, his mother was death, Papa was dead, the Yi Zhi Xie in my heart was dead. I sobbed while running in the snow, but no one appeared. The tears turned into ice on my face and my skin cracked, and my blood mixed with my tears, turning it into red ice tears.

A 12 year old me, running in the snow for one day and one night, finally collapsing in the snow from exhaustion. The snow flakes fall on my face and I look skyward, not moving because I have no strength. I felt like everything is fine, and soon I won't be hurting anymore. Let everything end in this pristine whiteness, without a hint of blood.

Brother Wolf found me and used his claws to brush the snow off me, trying to pull me away but he was too small then and couldn't move me. So he just crawled on my chest and used his body to shield me, licking me face, my hand, trying to give me warmth. I tell him to leave, otherwise he'll freeze to death, too.

He stared at me, and the way he looked at me was the way Papa looked at me, telling me to survive. I remembered what I promised Papa, that I will survive no matter what happens to me. And I will be happy. Because Papa's only wish for me was that I survive. I look into Brother Wolf's eyes "I was wrong, I want to survive, I must survive." Thank Heavens the wolf pack arrived just in time, and the snow stopped. I was saved by the wolf pack, who used their bodies to keep me warm and the warm blood of their prey to invigorate me.

I suddenly yell out “Don’t talk anymore! Mu Da Duo, this is just the past for you, but it’s forever a scar on my heart. It was so bloody, and now it has finally become a scab that doesn’t bleed anymore. Why is your appearance ripping apart all my scars? Go back! Remember our childhood friendship and pretend that you never saw me. There is no Yu Jin in this world now for a long time. She really has died, died in that big snow storm.”

I turn to leave but she grabs my sleeve “Big sister, big sister.....”

Before leaving the Xiong Nu – Yu Dan, Ri Chan, Mu Da Duo, and I were the closest of friends. Because of Papa, Yu Dan and I were even closer. When Yu Dan, Ri Chan, and I went out to play, we didn’t like to bring Mu Da Duo. She would stare and I would tease her, to call me big sister and I will take her along. She stubbornly refuses because I don’t know my age so why should she call me big sister. But she would still tag along behind us. Over time, we became closer because we had the same stubborn wild personality, loving to make mischief. One day I picked my age and had her call me big sister, and that time she agreed. Turned out that she did so because she thought I would do whatever she wanted if she called me big sister.

Her calling me big sister made my heart soften, so I explained “I am doing fine now, and I don’t want to go back, and I can’t go back.” She understood I didn’t want to see Yi Zhi Xie, and she promised that she would keep this encounter a secret from him. I grab her hand “Thank you. When are you going back?” She happily grabbed me “Tomorrow, so today everyone was busy and I snuck out to play.”

I laugh “I’ll show you around, and have the kitchen whip up some Han specialties, as a farewell of sorts.” She wonders if we will meet again? Looking back, the past is clear, but we can no longer find the way back. I bitterly say “I hope not. It is impossible for me to see Yi Zhi Xie with a smile. And you’ve already chosen him. If we meet again, it’ll be difficult for you.”

Her face turned red and she looked down, leaving me understanding

how much she has chosen him “Are you his consort now?”

She shook her head “He treats me so well, so his Queen hates me. He let me tag along on this trip even though no one wanted it. If he asked me to be his consort, I would gladly agree.” She snuck a slightly chastened look at me.

I smiled, she’s a proud and free Xiong Nu woman, who loves who she loves without shame. “Don’t worry about me, regardless of our friendship, if you want to choose Yi Zhi Xie, that is your life. I just don’t want to ever see him again.” She asks if I want to kill him? I shake my head “Not at this moment. I struggled a lot, and now things have finally settled down. In the future.....in the future I won’t either, as long as we never meet again. Mu Da Duo, it’s not me who wants to kill him, it’s whether he wants to kill me. Sometimes you have to make a clean break. Just like he would rather see my Papa commit suicide and feel guilty about it afterwards, but he wouldn’t give my Papa a way out.”

She tried to argue that he never wanted us dead, never ordered it. I reassure her “What are you worried about? That I would go kill him? He can kill me easily, he is the Xiong Nu’s number one warrior, and now the Shan Yu of the entire Xiong Nu kingdom. To kill him would make me the enemy of the entire Xiong Nu. Then my entire life would be mired in this hatred and bitterness. Papa only wanted me to find someone who loves me, who would protect me and make me happy. He didn’t want me spending my life seeking vengeance. Mu Da Duo, if one day I see Yi Zhi Xie again, the likelihood is that I will die. You don’t need to worry about him. If he finds out I’m still alive, whether I can remain standing here in Chang An is a question.”

She promised never to tell anyone I’m alive.

.....

It’s another New Year’s Eve, and I’m writing on my cloth diary again, about how happy I am that Jiu Ye has called me over, which is the first time he has took the initiative to ask me to go see him. I look into the chest

and the clothes have become a big stack by now. When will I be able to convey the thoughts on these clothes to him?

I first go wish Shi Buo and Shi Feng a happy new year and banter with them before heading to the Bamboo Residence. When I arrive I smell plum blossom, which surprises me since Jiu Ye doesn't plant these flowers. On the table is a vase with a white plum blossom, beside it are two wine cups and two chopsticks, plus a bottle of wine warming on a pit. I ask what delicious food he's planning to treat me to, and he tells me to wait and see.

He invites me to sit down next to him, asking "Does your shoulder still hurt?" I give an "ah" before looking quizzically at him, telling him it doesn't hurt anymore while nodding my head. He stopped "Does it hurt or not?" I shake my head "Just a little hurting."

He smiled "Why don't you figure out if it hurts or not, because right now your gestures don't match your words." I chide myself for being useless and explain "It was hurting before but not much anymore."

He tells me "Busy running a business doesn't mean you neglect yourself. It's cold out and everyone is bundled up in layers except for you. No wonder you are constantly complaining about having a sore throat, neck pain, or shoulder ache."

I stare down at the wine cup, with a hidden smile, secretly feeling happy. Shi Feng brings two big bowls of noodles, leading me to ask if that is all he's feeding me. He explains the noodles signifies long life, so he wants to use this bowl of noodles to celebrate my birthday and wish me a long life. I explain it's not my birthday.

He gently says "Everyone should have a special day, and since you don't know your birthday, let's just use today! Last year we met again on this day, so it's a good day. It's also the first day of the year, so from now on, everyone will be celebrating your birthday with you when they celebrate new year."

My voice is stuck in my throat and I can't speak, so I shovel the noodles in my mouth while he sits besides me and watches. The noodles are fragrant and delicious, and when I eat it, it warms me entire body up. Usually all I love are meat, but this is the first time I think noodles are the most delicious food in the world.

The sun sets early in the Winter and soon the room is dark and he lights a lamp. I know I should leave but I am loathe to go. I finally get up the courage to tell him that I am learning a new tune and it sounds better than before.

He takes out his flute and wipes it before handing it to me. I lower my head and play the new tune, which is a song about a woman wondering when she will have a chance to ride in the same boat as the prince, and whether the prince knows how she feels about him.

I practiced this song thousands of time, but when I'm playing I'm so nervous that the tune shakes. When I'm done, I keep my head lowered, holding the flute. I sit there without moving, worried that if I make any move I will break something.

Silence. Dead silence. The air appears to bind together and the flames have stopped flickering, turning dark.

"Even though it's a foreign to me, the tune is nice. But you didn't play it well. It's dark so you should get going!" Jiu Ye lightly responded.

Before I even felt the pain, there was a tear in my heart. A few moments later, that pain radiates outward and slowly seeps into every pore of my body. It hurts so much my body is shaking. I raise my head to him and he meets my eyes before immediately turning away. I stubbornly stare at him but he keeps staring at the vase with the white plum blossom. The unvoiced question of "why" is clearly in my eyes, but he pretends not to notice.

He's not going to pay you any more attention, so let's go! At least it's

not completely over, I can leave with a shred of dignity. That is what my heart is telling me, but I stubbornly cling on to the final hope that he will raise his head and look at me one more time.

After a long time, I silently get up and walk outside. When I reach the door, I remember that I am still holding the flute. I am grasping it too tightly and my nails have pierced my palm and it's bleeding. The blood gets on the flute.

I turn back and put the flute on the table before walking out.

In the dark, I walk aimlessly. How to get back to Luo Yu House I don't even remember. All my mind can hear are the words "Even though it's a foreign to me, the tune is nice. But you didn't play it well" over and over again.

Why? Why? He doesn't have any feelings for me? But then why does he treat me so well? Why would he wait for me under the lamp when I'm late coming home? Why does he remember every one of my small ailments? Why does he talk to me so gently and tenderly? Why celebrate my birthday with me? Why? So many whys leave my head feeling like it's going to explode.

New Year's Eve has every family hanging a red lantern outside their house. The warm red light illuminates the street and the air smells like fragrant food. Everything is warm and happy, reaching out I can see joy everywhere. But looking down all I can see is my own lonely shadow, swaying in the lantern light.

A few small kids are lighting fire crackers by the side of the street, the crackers letting out a "pop, pop" sound. The kids laugh and are merry, plugging their ears and hiding in the corner to wait for the big explosion.

I walk right past the fire cracker when it suddenly goes off. A bit of the flames land on my skirt, and with a breeze, it catches on fire. The kids realize they did something bad and take off running. I stare numbly as the

fire grows bigger, before realizing what is happening. I hurry to use my hands to pat the flames but it doesn't extinguish. Right when I'm so nervous that I'm about to lay on the ground and roll around to extinguish the flames, suddenly a large cloak is striking my skirts. A few taps and the fire has been extinguished.

Chapter 10: Assassination

I knock on the door, asking where Jiu Ye is? Xiao Feng tells me Jiu Ye is arranging his books in the study, and no one is allowed inside so I should wait outside for him. I ignore him and walk towards the study, which is the first time I've been there despite being familiar with the Bamboo Residence. The study is enormous and filled with shelves of books. Jiu Ye is arranging books, so I purposely walk loudly. He hears me and smiles, inviting me inside. He tells me to sit, he'll be done soon. I make a face at Xiao Feng.

I curiously look at the books, asking if he's read it all. He answers that he has flipped through most of them. I assess all the books, ranging from philosophy texts to tactical manuals. I see another shelf with only one book, and then some sheafs of paper. I see the paper is all covered with Jiu Ye's handwriting, and it discusses war strategy for conquering or protecting a city, how the philosopher Mo Zi lamented how the strong countries attacked the weak, and some more writing on how make weapons and how to keep warm in winter.

Another shelf has only medical journals. One book, with Jiu Ye's note on the side, is an anatomy text that also discusses male-female relations. My face flames and I drop the book, wondering why he's reading it. He asks me if I read it, and I tell him with a red face that I glanced at it before but burned it afterwards. He looks confused and I realize he's pointing to another book I am holding, which is in a writing I can't read. I am so embarrassed I want to crawl into a hole. I try to explain I don't understand this but wanted to study it because I was curious. I'm nervous and babbling, and I can tell he's trying to control his laughter. He finally gives up and leans back on his wheelchair and starts to guffaw.

My embarrassment gives way to happiness at hearing his laugh, and he's just so amused at seeing how his casual question caused me to lose my famous cool. I confirm that those books are not in the Han language. He nods, and asks why I'm not probing any further. I tell him "You never probed into my life with the wolves. Why I was born in the Xi Yu but spoke perfect Han, but couldn't speak any of the Xi Yu languages.

Everyone has things that are hard to explain. If you want to tell me one day, I will gladly sit besides you and listen. If you don't want to tell me, I won't probe. Someone once told me that he only knows the me in his eyes. I also feel the same way, I only know the you in my eyes."

He answers that he doesn't even know where to start, so I assure him that I will always be on his side. He asks why I'm here and I explain I had the day free and wanted to come see him....and Xiao Feng. I suddenly notice a intricate crutch standing against the wall. Does he use it? I've never seen him on crutches before.

As we walk out of the study, the door automatically closes and doesn't open again, showing that the contraptions are not just for his ease of use, but designed by him to control who can access places within the Bamboo Residence. He explains that he's heading out in a bit so I excuse myself. Instead he invites me along, to go visit some farms outside the city, where I can try some fresh fruit straight from the trees. I happily nod.

Shi Buō drives the carriage himself and is told I'm not going back to Luo Yu Fan and will instead be coming along to visit the farm. Shi Buō appears to want to say something but doesn't, just getting the carriage on the road. As the carriage enters the woods, there is suddenly the sound of horse hooves chasing us. I instinctively grab my silk sash with the gold bells on the ends. Jiu Ye just smiles and shakes his head, indicating that I needn't worry.

The horses and riders pass us by but Shi Buō knows they are just pretending. His horse whip comes down and their horses topple, sending the two men flying to the ground. They immediately attack Shi Buō but are quickly disarmed. The two men notice Shi Buō's custom made horse whip and their expression changes from rage to stunned shock. They start talking to Shi Buō and kneeling before him. Shi Buō asks the kneeling man a question, which causes Jiu Ye's smile to disappear. He orders the man to repeat what he just said in Han for me.

The man quickly explains "We were not following the Shi Estate carriage, and had no intention of harming anyone on the Shi Estate. We

were hired to track the head of Luo Yu House and assassinate her.” He kept bowing to Shi Buo “We really didn’t know you are from the Shi Estate, and that the young lady is friends with the Big Boss. If we knew, an entire mountain of gold and we would not accepted this assignment.”

I ask in shock “Who hired you?”The man refuses to answer, abiding by the code of the assassins not to reveal their client. Shi Buo explains I will never get the answer from them. I tell Shi Buo to let them go, and he does after Jiu Ye also tells him to do so. The two men promise to never divulge what happened here today, swearing an oath that I know is the most deadly oath for any traveler in the Gobi Desert.

When walking away, one man runs back and kneels tearfully in front of Jiu Ye “I did not know this young lady is the young master’s person. I almost betrayed the grace you bestowed. I am no better than a pig or a dog” and tries to kill himself. Jiu Ye uses his bow to shoot the sword out of the man’s hand and tells him that he mistook Jiu Ye for someone else. Jiu Ye never bestowed any grace on him before.

I’m still stuck on the sentence “this young lady is the young master’s person” and suddenly think these two guys are not bad at all. The two men know they did not make a mistake, since Shi Buo is personally guarding Jiu Ye. They discuss how their entire family has been graced by Jiu Ye’s benefaction and they continue to bow until their foreheads are bloody. I tell them to scram if they feel gratitude and not try to kill themselves, leaving us with two corpses to take care of. And in a steely voice, I tell them both they made a mistake in identifying Jiu Ye, and they finally get my drift and quickly promise to return to Xi Yu and never speak of today ever again.

Continuing on our way, I wonder who hired these assassins, and did Mu Da Duo reveal I was alive. Was my life going to be in danger again? I tell Jiu Ye that I haven’t made any enemies in Xi Yu, and the only person who could do this can easily send his own men to kill me, so why use assassins. Shi Buo offers to find out more about this, but I tell him it’s not necessary. If its someone else I can handle it, if its that person, there is nothing I can do.

We arrive at the farm, which is vast and lifts my spirits, reminding me that my life is within my own control. No one can try and take it away from me. I can see Shi Buo is intending something, and I pull him aside to remind him to let those two assassins go as per Jiu Ye's orders. I run back to the farm and happily try to identify all the vegetables growing in the field. Jiu Ye finishes his meeting and joins me, teasing that I look like a farm girl.

I walk with Jiu Ye along the field, the sun slowly setting, and the mood reminds me of the saying that "men farm and women sew", and how people find happiness in living a simple life.

I sneak a peek at Jiu Ye, and to my surprise, he's also looking at me. Our eyes meet and his face suddenly reddens, and he quickly turns away. It's the first time I've seen him red-faced and stare at him, His wheelchair moves faster and finally he asks me "What are you looking at." I tease him "Looking at you!" but when I say this his is just speechless, leaving me berating myself for making a mess of the situation again. He finally laughs and shakes his head "You really were raised in Xi Yu," and I respond "I'm already much better, back then I would say anything I wanted."

.....

After I get home, I take out a cloth and write down my thoughts. I see that Jiu Ye enjoys reading the scholars who extol peace for the common people over nationalistic expansion. Especially Mo Zi, who spent his life for the people, and trying to convince the smaller countries to band together to oppose the hegemonies. So does Jiu Ye want to oppose the Han dynasty? I can see that he's conflicted and torn, and that his background is clearly not as simple it appears on the surface.

I tell Hong Gu to hire me a teacher on the old scholars, especially Mo Zi, for me to learn. The teacher won't come teach at the dancing house so I go and listen to his lecture, leaving me with much food for thought. When I return, Hong Gu excitedly tells me that the Princess sent lots of reward today because Li.....has become Consort Li. Soon Consort Li might be sending gifts as well.

Hong Gu sighs that Li Yan is truly something, having only entered the Palace last Fall and already she's become Consort Li, second only to Empress Wei. My attention is caught by the Lover's Vines, where tiny white flowers are sprouting. I clap my forehead and ask if the Emperor has dispatched an army recently. Hong Gu looks confused, which gives me relief that the army likely hasn't left yet for war. I tell Hong Gu to catalogue all the gifts and keep only what she likes, the rest will be sold for a good price now before one day we are in need of money and sell it for cheap.

Chapter 11: Handkerchief Delivery

The city of Xu Fang is one of the Emperor's tributaries at the border, so every time the Xiong Nu attacks Xu Fang, the entire Chang An city goes on high alert.

When Emperor Wu of Han first ascended the throne, he vowed to eliminate this enemy. The Great General Wei was sent out and he managed to battle two of the Xiong's Nu's generals and regain valuable territory along the River South region. Liu Che ordered people moved to that region and there he built Xu Fang city.

To protect the River South region, Liu Che once again sends his generals out. For this expedition, other than the Great General Wei leading the pack, General Gong Xun Che takes the left flank, General Gong Xun He takes the right flank, General Zhao Xin takes the first attack, and General Li Guang (Li Gan's father) heads back the back support.

The Great General Wei is given 60,000 troops for this mission to attack the Xiong Nu. Huo Qu Bing is named as a Captain and leads 800 of the finest Yu Lin Army warriors to head out to battle with his two uncles, the Great General Wei and General Gong Xun He.

I sit on the top of a big tree staring at the road. Under the sunlight the armor glistens and makes my eyes a little glazed over. Huo Qu Bing, wearing an all black armor, rides a horse past, heading for the city gates. Compared to when he wore the wide sleeved robes, dressed in battle gear takes away some of his carefree nature and adds some dashing valor. His striking aura is palpable.

I haven't seen him in a month and his skin is almost the color of bronze. Looks like he was under the sun everyday. Even from a distance, I can still sense the tightly bound danger radiating from him. Suddenly I feel like he's a lot like my own species. Like Brother Wolf, the shiniest beacon in the pack. Whenever the wolves are about to attack, he will just silently and surely look straight ahead, never wavering.

He occasionally looks on the sides of the streets. I straighten myself and stand on the biggest branch to look at him. He finally meets my eyes and I smile and wave at him, pointing towards Yi Ping Ju's direction. He doesn't shift on the horse or slow down, his cold gaze not even changing in the slightest. When our eyes met his horse is already rushing past me. I turn my head and watch as his figure disappears in a trail of dust.

I run into Shi Sheng Xing and Shi Feng as they are headed out of the city. Xiao Feng calls out to me and lets me know that Jiu Ye has sent someone to look for me.

There is a gentle breeze blowing through the Bamboo Residence, and Jiu Ye is sitting there feeding pigeons when I walk in. The pigeons scatter and the sudden movement of white only leaves me noticing the stillness of his blue robe. I ask him why he is looking for me, and he hesitates so I tell him to always be frank with me. He asks to borrow money from me, and normally he ought to explain why, but he can't tell me anything. If the business goes well, he can repay me next year with interest. I gladly lend him the money.

The amount he asks for makes me suck in my breath. He tells me to lend him what I have, and I say I can get the entire amount. I own half the dancing houses in Chang An now, and even though business is slow, Luo Yu House is still doing well since everyone knows Li Yan came from our house before entering the Palace. He knows it's still not easy to get this money now, but I tell him to just wait and see,

When I get back to Luo Yu House it is dinner time, and after going through the accounts with Hong Gu many times, all I can get is 1/3rd what he needs. She asks why I need the money for but I won't tell her anything other than it's to do business and make more money.

I ask about the gifts the Princess sent, and then teasingly mutter why Consort Li hasn't come by to thank us for helping her. Hong Gu laughs at me and calls me a money hungry girl, heading off to sleep. I stop her, wanting to write her a promissory note before take this money, She startles, telling me the money is all mine, but I say it's half hers. She reminds me

that I give her things constantly and always lets her pick the pretty baubles she likes first,

I counter that she runs all the daily operations and I never need to worry about the businesses. She worked hard to get Consort Li into the Palace, so of course half of the gifts from the Princess is hers. She thinks anyone can run the house, but I counter that its hard to find someone as capable as she is. I write the promissory note and shove it in her hand.

I take out a cloth and write “Today you asked me to borrow money, which made me very happy. You can borrow money from anywhere in Chang An but you asked me, so that means you trust me. I know you ought to easily have this money based on how big the Shi Enterprises are, so where did you spend all the money these years? During the recent wars, common people are caught in the cross hairs and starving. Plus there was a cold frost in Xi Yu the likes which have not been seen in a hundred years, wiping out crop after crop. Do you want the money to help the Xi Yu people? If that is true, then I will use everything I own, and do everything I can, to assist you.....”

I think to myself, it looks like my original assumption was correct, Li Yan and Jiu Ye have the same goal in mind. Li Yan wants to stop the westward expansion of the Han Empire from within the Palace, while Jiu Ye wants to protect the kingdoms of the Western territories. Looks like I did the right thing by helping Li Yan.

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In the courtyard a woman sits and coos with her parakeet, both of them forever locked in a cage, keeping each other company. In the recesses of this Palace back residence (called Ho Gong, which is where the Emperor’s women live), under the curtains, how many women’s tears and youth have been locked away? Compared to the Han Emperor’s ladies, the Xiong Nu wives are somewhat happier. Even if they are lonely, they can ride horses under the blue sky. The women here can only quietly sit in the courtyard.

Princess Yangping looks at me and notes that even having a parakeet as company is not bad. She thinks I'm smart enough at least..... One we step inside the residence, I give the Princess a look assuring her that I will be cautious. Li Yan smiles and stands up, welcoming the Princess to sit down. Li Yan waves me in from outside the curtain and then sends her maid away. After chatting, the Princess heads to go meet the Empress, leaving me to chat with Li Yan.

After the Princess leaves, Li Yan asks why I wanted to see her personally, did she not send enough gifts and money already? I laugh and tease that money is naturally something where one can never have enough. She bops me on the forehead and smiles at me. I look at her carefully, she is dressed extravagantly but still elegant. Perhaps it is because she is already married, but her face has some shades of sultry despite dressed in simple layers. She sees me staring at her and blushes, asking if I saw anything? I laugh "Initially I didn't see anything, but since you mentioned it, I think I do now." She reaches out and touches her face "You must've been sneaking those books, shame on you!"

Her eyes are filled with embarrassment and a little bit of temper, which makes her look even more beautiful, and I just stare. "What a country-toppling beauty. The Emperor is lucky to have you. Even when he is stressed, seeing you will surely make him smile." She asks what exactly I want, and I hand over a handkerchief with the Li character embroidered on it. She recognizes it as being identical to her old one, which she thought was lost awhile ago. I explain I burned the old one already and made a new one for her.

I continue "The original handkerchief was found by third young master Li and he was anxious to find the owner of it, so I decided to burn it to avoid problems." She asks "Li Gan?" I ask if there is another third young master Li in Chang An?

She asks why I brought a new one if I burned the old one. I tell her to burn this one if she wants. We sit in silence, and then she asks if I knew about the deadly frost this Winter in Xi Yu? I've heard, and there has been a huge influx of dancers from the Xi Yu. Now, the price of watching a dancing show can buy the virginity of one of the dancers, that is how

desperate they are.

She coldly remarks how this will cause all the dancing houses to engage in a price war until these girls will be worth nothing. I tell Li Yan that I have ordered none of my dancing houses to lower their prices or wages, and she knows I am helping these girls in the only way I can. I laugh that it's for my own gain, since a price war will mean that the prices will stay low for a long time. She sighs, chiding me for refusing to accept a compliment.

I tell her that despite growing up in Xi Yu, I don't have any emotional ties to there, so I don't have a strong desire to help Xi Yu. Everything I do is for the business of the dancing houses. She wishes I had the same feelings as her but knows these things cannot be forced. She is just glad I am not standing in her way. She asks about business and I say it is good thank to her. She asks about her brothers, since she doesn't have a chance to see them often. I say her second brother is now running with a pack of rich young masters in the city. She sighs that he's always been the spoiled and pampered one in the family, and asks me to talk to him for her so that he doesn't get into any trouble.

I stand up and say that I don't want to manage her two brothers for her, and she tells me I ought to care if not because Li Yan Nian composed all these tunes for the dancing house. As I head out I suddenly run back inside, informing her that I am so lucky that the first time in the Palace I actually managed to see the Emperor, who is walking with the Princess in the distance.

She smiles and tells me to wait with her to welcome the Emperor, the Princess will surely speak well of me.

.....

Xiao Qian lands on the window sill and I remove the cloth, chiding him for needing to go on a diet soon or else he'll become a small chicken. In the note, Jiu Ye asks me where I learned some new Xi Yu phrases, and then reminds me the two pigeons need to go on a diet or else they will be

ashamed to call themselves pigeons. I laugh out loud.

I take a cloth and write “I’m laying on the window and talking to you right now. I’m guessing you are reading a book under the lamplight. When I raise my head I see the stars above, and the flowers of the Lover’s Vines are blooming. The white ones are like jade while the yellow ones are like gold, the fragrance blanketing the air. I can smell it even when I’m going to sleep at night. I already plucked some to dry in the bamboo basket, so that when Fall comes and the flowers wilt, I can still smell the dried flowers. I went to the Palace today, after much deliberation. The Li family is a prominent one in the Han court, different than the Great General Wei’s lowly birth, the current General Li Guang is descend from a line of high Han court officials. I gave Li Yan the handkerchief, knowing that she will surely not be able to resist aligning with this prominent family, knowing that Li Gan can be of use to her. I know Li Gan’s adoration of her will only become a tool for her to use. But I can’t worry about that anymore. I only want to do what can help you. I only want to see you happy. Once the Han dynasty stops attacking the various Xi Yu territories, will the worry in your brows ease? Perhaps then you can genuinely be happy and do what you want to do, and stop forcing yourself.....”

I put this cloth in the chest with a smile.

“The days pass so fast, and in a blink of an eye, it’s already the end of Summer. The flowers in the Lover’s Vines are growing sparse. Today I suddenly understood that the Lover’s Vines do represent a pair of lovers. A pair of lovers who go through a lot and finally have happiness. One flower opens first, but then waits for the other flower to open. Isn’t that like a pair of lovers who hasn’t met before. When the opened flower turns yellow is when the other flower opens. One white and one yellow, when they meet and dance. When one flower wilts the other continues to valiantly bloom, to not waste the chance given. Their blooming reminds the person viewing the flower that there was once another flower blooming besides it. Once it disappears into the wind, I believe that in the wind, the other flower waits there, unseen and silently, for it to be reunited.....”

.....

“It is already Fall and the rain comes down. A person feels a bit lazy, constantly thinking about random things. Heard the Princess mention that Li Yan is worried about why she has not yet conceived. Her worry isn’t just a desire to become a mother, it is that without a child, her plan cannot begin. The position of the Crown Prince remains empty, so if she can bear a boy, one day she can fight for the throne for him. No matter how much love a woman receives, the only way to protect her position down the line is only through her child.”

Seeing Li Yan, in addition to admiration, I am also scared of this woman. How strong must her hate and love be, for a woman to gamble on her entire life and the life of her child in a deadly battle of intrigue. I ask myself, and there is no way I can do it. If I had a child, I will never, ever, let the child get embroiled in a battle. I will teach the child the same things Papa taught me so that the child learns how to strategize, but I want to child to grow up happy and safe. Strategic intelligence is just something to be used to protect oneself.

My face starts to heat up. I haven’t gotten married yet and already I’m thinking about my child’s future. I wonder if I will ever have a child in my life? After thinking for some time, I don’t have an answer. But when I look outside and see the Lover’s Vines, which only have green remaining on them, I think I understand. Not every bloom will flower, but to welcome the sunlight and bid farewell to the moonlight, playing with the wind and battling with the rain, that is living a full life. I don’t think they will have any regrets.....

Chapter 12: Invitation

The Fall arrives and the Han's battle with the Xiong Nu ends. Even though the army commanded by the Great General Wei captured or killed tens of thousands of Xiong Nu, one of his subordinates the General Zhao Xin met the army led by the Shan Yu himself in battle, and somehow Yi Zhi Xie was able to convince Zhao Xin to switch sides.

When the news reaches Chang Ah, Emperor Wu of Han orders Zhao Xin's entire family and estate to be killed. When the special army arrives, they discover Zhao Xin's two young sons have somehow vanished. The Emperor is livid, until another new arrives that makes him thrilled, Huo Qu Bing, in an attitude like he doesn't care and refusing to follow battle protocol, privately leads 800 of his hot-blooded Yu Lin Army soldiers into battle against direct orders to stay put.

He succeeds in sneaking onto the Xiong Nu army base, and he manages to kill the Prime Minister, the Finance Minister, and a bevy of officials ranking from the Shan Yu's grandfather's generation. His troops captures the Shan Yu's uncle Luo Gu Bi and kills two thousand and twenty eight soldiers. Huo Qu Bing's private attack expedition emerged victorious despite having smaller numbers, and he personally managed to capture or kill four of the top officials in the Xiong Nu.

At a time when both sides suffered tremendous losses, and a Han general switches sides to the Xiong Nu, Huo Qu Bing's prowess on the battlefield and his success only appears even more stunning. The Emperor crowns him as a Grand Duke and gives him wealth to equal over a thousand households. For the Great General Wei who commanded this entire army, battling to a draw with the Xiong Nu in this tussle, the Emperor does not cast blame or reward.

When I hear about all this, it makes me even more confused. If Yi Zhi Xie can somehow smuggle Zhao Xin's two young sons out of Chang An under the Emperor's nose, then he can kill me anytime, why even hire assassins?

Huo Qu Bing dumbly stares into Yi Ping Ju. From top to bottom, all three floors are filled with beautiful young girls, chattering away and lively. His face is somber while I stand next to him and giggle.

He sudden turns and jumps back into the carriage and pulls me inside while I holler "Hey, hey, Grand Duke, you are supposed to be treating me to a meal at Yi Ping Ju."

He huffs in annoyance "I wanted to treat you, not every single girl in your dancing houses."

I laughed "I always wanted to have the girls gather for a meal to strength their ties. But if the meal is too cheap people will laugh at me, but if the meal is too expensive my wallet will hurt. Since you agreed to treat, I thought why not invite all the girls, so I had Yi Ping Ju help organize it. Why are you so stingy? You went out for a twirl and came back a Grand Duke. Treating a few hundred of us to a meal is something you can easily afford."

"Went out for a twirl? What an interesting way to downplay it. Next time you join me for the twirl and I'll split everything I'm rewarded with you in half" he says as he continues to stare at me.

I avert his eyes and look outside with a smile "Where are we going? Knowing we were going out to eat, I purposely didn't eat much for lunch. And even though we are not eating at Yi Ping Ju, you still have to pay that bill."

He has a small smile and quietly sits there looking at me, not saying he'll pay for it or not pay for it. After being apart for over a month, he appears the same as before, yet he appears to have changed as well. My heart feels this indescribable confusion. I subconsciously shrink back into my seat and press myself into the seat back.

When the carriage stops, he jumps off with an elegant flourish, turning around to assist me. I laugh and raise my chin, pushing his hand away. I

push off the seat and with a kick on the roof, somersault out of the carriage. I turn in the air, my skirts swirling, and land with a flourish in front of him. I look at him with a pleased expression and he smiles back "You're so competitive, but that was very pretty."

The driver left and I looked around at the surroundings. We were in a quiet lane with tall walls on both sides. I suspiciously asked "Where is this place? What are you planning?"

He replied "Climb the wall and go inside." I stared wide eyed at him "Looking at the height of this wall, this is no ordinary estate. It's alright if I get captured, but you're a Grand Duke now." He countered "Then it'll depend on how good you are. With the wall this high, I can't climb over without some assistance."

Feeling curious, and a bit playful, plus some excitement, I still acted all annoyed in front of him "What bad luck, having to go through so much trouble just for a meal." My hands went to the silk sash I normally wore around my waist, which had gold balls attached to one end. It looks decorative, but has another purpose. My hand flew forward and the sash cut a golden streak in the air, twisting around to catch a branch on the other side the wall.

Huo Qu Bing used the sash and climbed two steps before he flipped himself and landed on the tree. I did as well, and took the sash off the branch and put it around my wrist. My hand held another branch as I stood up and looked around the yard.

He muffled his laughter "I had thought you enjoyed being a thief."

I replied "No one in Chang An would dare have ideas when it comes to these rich and powerful people. I'm not going to worry about my insignificant life and just have fun now. If something happens, I'll just say you ordered me. And if you were captured, that would be even more amusing."

Just as I jump off the tree with Huo Qu Bing, a few large black dogs immediately charge us. I throw my sash at their heads, hoping to knock them out with the gold balls. Huo Qu Bing grabs me from behind and pulls me into his embrace. With one arm around my waist, his other arm pulls the sash and decrease the strength of the gold balls.

Before I could think clearly, the dogs have arrived at our feet, all of them twirling around our legs and wagging their tails at Huo Qu Bing. I angrily asked “Don’t tell me this is your own estate.”

His arm around my waist doesn’t loosen, and instead he presses up close to me, resting his chin on the top of my head. He murmured in a low voice “Unfortunately, you have guessed correctly.”

I struggle to free myself, but before I can get free, the soft warmth of his breath grazes my skin, making it tingly. His body has a male fresh scent completely different than a woman’s smell of lotions and makeup. He’s like the oak tree and sunlight. His smell so near my nose makes me feel like I almost can’t breath. My body feels weak and my head is a little cloudy, leaving me unable to think of what move I wanted to make.

In my nervousness I thought about just throwing the gold balls at his head to free myself, but then I worried that I might bash his head in. Before I can decide, he suddenly releases me like nothing just happened. He pulls my hand so that we kneel down before the dogs as he talks to them “Get familiar with this smell, so you guys don’t accidentally hurt my person.”

I have no choice but to allow the dogs to sniff me all around, while I scoff “It’s just a few dogs, what a joke! How dare you look down on us wolves.”

He patted their heads “If I wasn’t here, they would have attacked you the moment your feet touched the ground, and called for their companions. Isn’t attacking in large numbers one of your wolf tricks? And don’t forget about the people who would have swiftly followed.”

I give a hump and toss off his hand “Why would I ever have a reason to sneak into your estate. There will never be a reason for me to tussle with them.”

He gives a whistle and the dogs run off. He stands up and brushes his hands clean and looks at me with a smile and teases “It looks like you enjoy jumping over walls and onto roofs. Who knows if one day you will miss me and come here to see me. So I’m taking you here to familiarize you with the route. In case you alert people, and with your thin skin, you may be afraid to come back again.”

My face is red and I tie the sash around my waist “Where is the front door? I’m leaving.”

He ignored me and walked ahead “I brought back a royal chef from the Ruo Yi kingdom, a master at roasting meat. A sheep from the plains who has been running from the Spring until the Fall, with meat that is perfectly tender. Paired with side dishes from other Xi Yu territories, eating the meat when it’s fresh of the pit, that taste is so good it’s impossible to describe.”

I swallowed and my feet started to follow him. The Han people don’t eat roast meats, preferring to braise. When I get desperate I would start a fire and roast my own meat, but my culinary skill is so that only the wolves likely find acceptable.

I kneel before the fire pit, with my hands propping up my chin, staring at the chef. A boy no older than sixteen, whether it’s the fire or my staring, his face gets redder and redder.

Huo Qu Bing pulls me off the ground in one fell swoop “If you keep staring, we’ll be eating minced meat.” I take a deep sniff of the air and reluctantly follow him back to the table.

The chef brings the meat to the table and I immediately shove a big piece in my mouth. After eating a few pieces, Huo Qu Bing asks me

“While I was away, what did you do in Chang An?”

“Not much, just running the business. Oh wait, I went into the Palace and met the Emperor.....”

Before I finished talking, he hit me on the head and growled “What insanity possessed you to enter the Palace to meet the Emperor?”

I hold my head and glare at him “Who says you can tell me what to do? I can do whatever I want!”

He glared at me back for a few moments before asking “Did that hurt your head?”

My eyes widen “Why don’t you let me hit you on your head and you can see!”

Who knew he would actually stick his head out in front of me. I laughingly push his head away “If I hit it, my hand would hurt more!”

His face is solemn and he asks me “What did the Emperor say?”

I cocked my head and thought ” Complimented me a bit, for my sudden appearance and scaring away the desert thieves. He rewarded me a few items, and with a smile told me I can go visit Consort Li in the Palace in the future to keep her company.”

“What was your impression of the Emperor?” I thought a bit and shook my head, so he said “What’s with the head shaking? You don’t have any impression?”

I respond “That’s not possible, especially for such a person! It’s just too complicated that I can’t explain. His age is around 37 years old but he looks like he’s barely 30. His eyes make him seem like he’s 40, but his energy is like a 20 year old. He was very warm in speaking to me, but I

know that is just one of thousands of ways he can talk to people. There is a complicated nature within him. He doesn't care about position and background, not caring about Consort Li's low birth, so he was very considerate towards me. But he still resides higher than anyone, and no one dares to offend him. I was kneeling the entire time."

He coldly huffed "You could have been outside (the Palace), but you deliberately chose to go inside and kneel. Serves you right!"

I can see he's not happy so I reassure her "Don't worry, Consort Li was besides me the entire time."

He shook his head "One can get bored looking at peonies and want to pluck some dog tail grass to play with one of these days."

I angrily laugh "So I'm a dog tail grass, that would make you....." I don't finish my sentence.

"Make me what? What am I?"

I humphed at him and ignored him to eat my meat. My mind was filled with images of Li Yan smiling at the Emperor that day. The Emperor and the Princess already knew I was friends with Huo Qu Bing, but it was the first time Li Yan has heard of this. When she heard this, I can see that underneath her smiling face is concern and worry.

Huo Qu Bing asked "What are you thinking about" and I quickly answer "Li Yan" to avoid him asking more.

I finish eating and wash my hands in the water, wiping it with a cloth. I think back to how the scholar officials have been discussing how Ning Che suggested to the Great General Wei to give a portion of his reward from the battle to Consort Li. When the Emperor heard of this, he gave Ning Che a higher position, which show how much he care for Consort Li.

I softly say “Having the Great General Wei give a portion of his reward to Consort Li is not her desire, it’s due to people wanting to remain in the Emperor’s good graces.” He coldly laughed “Do I care about that money? I despise Ning Che for suggesting that the Great General’s successes are solely for the Empress. Perhaps early on it was because of my aunt that my uncle was greatly used. But over the years, his multiple successful expeditions to the Xiong Nu was earned by himself. But those scholars refuse to give us any credit. Xi Ma Qian called me ill-mannered and rude, but when I see these useless scholars, I honestly don’t know what to say to them other than look at the sky.”

I see his exasperation and laugh “So there are people who leave you annoyed. I thought you weren’t scared of anyone. Who cares what they say? Those scholars have no power so they can talk more freely in front of the Emperor. But the Great General holds all the army control in the Empire, so he has to be extra careful when speaking to the Emperor.”

He sighed and didn’t answer. Seeing his furrowed brows, I felt bad and tugged on his sleeve. I tease “Xi Ma Qian is a mild-mannered gentleman. Your behavior really doesn’t merit that he compliment you.”

He looked at my hand “Why are you all touchy feely with me, that is not the behavior of a gently bred lady. But.....” and he tried to grab my hand “I like it.”

I angrily slap his hand away and he withdraws it with a smile. But his eyes are bright and his face is alive, which makes me relieved, and I smile back at him.

We haven’t see anyone but we hear their footsteps first. A voice says “What fragrant roast meat, the traditional Xi Yu roasting method. Qu Bing sure knows how to enjoy himself.” I quickly stand up but he shakes his head “Don’t worry, it’s my uncle.”

I knew I shouldn’t have come and angrily ask “Your uncle? General Wei and the Emperor are also your uncles. Which one is this? General Gong Xun He?”

Huo Qu Bing nodded and stood up to welcome them as Gong Xun He and Gong Xun Aou walk in. When they see me behind Huo Qu Bing, a look of shock passes through their faces but it was so quickly it barely registered. I knew how crafty they are.

When I returned home that night, I wasn't terribly happy or sad. I didn't want to let random people affect my mood, though I was a bit more alert inside.

When Gong Xun He saw the way I held my knife and cut my head, he looked flabbergasted and asked me if I lived with the Xiong Nu before. I was so nervous that I lied that I didn't. Gong Xun He was himself a Xiong Nu person, so he immediately recognized how I held the knife. He didn't ask any further but it was clear he knew I lied to him. His eyed me coldly after that. I wished I had casually answered that I lived there with the nomads on the plains. But my hesitation to reveal the truth will only make Gong Xun He suspect me. And Gong Xun Aou seems to dislike me even more, ignoring me the entire time.

Huo Qu Bing can sense their attitude but doesn't say anything. He was even more solicitous towards me. He took my knife and personally cut the meat before placing it before me. In the past, Huo Qu Bing has only been served by others, he has never served another. Gong Xun He and Gong Xun Aou are both stunned. When the arrogant Gong Xun Aou saw the way Huo Qu Bing treated me, he had no choice but to hide his dislike and treat me with more courtesy.

.....

These past few days, when meal time arrives, I remember the delicious roasted lamb and that talented chef. The food on the table before me pales and looks tasteless. If Huo Qu Bing knew that, after I ate his delicious food, I was so greedy that I've been plotting ways to steal his chef, he'll probably call me a ravenous greedy little wolf.

I was still daydreaming about my food when a girl comes in crying "Madam, please come, third master Li has arrived to tear down our dancing

house. I couldn't stop him and he ripped my dress."

I laugh and tell her to wipe her nose "Don't cry, I'll buy you a new outfit." She sniffled and asked to pick out her color and I say fine, asking her to explain about what happened. She got scared "We don't know either. Normally third master Li is gentle and refined, always polite to everyone. We always enjoy his visits. But today he stormed inside and demanded to see Hong Gu, and then started throwing things left and right. We tried to stop him but he pushed us aside. He looked like he wanted to punch someone so we all ran away. He's probably still throwing things right now."

Hong Gu, looking ragged, walks in and I laugh at her. She huffs at me "Laugh all you want, if he keeps destroying things, we'll all be out on the street tonight." I run outside after her "Don't be upset. If he wants to throw a fit, we can't stop him. He has martial arts and we can't win in a fight. Let him throw things until he gets tired and stops." I hand her a mirror and she yelps when she sees the state of her disarray.

She wails "I have never been so mistreated as today. Letting a young man yell and rail at me, calling me an evil cruel witch. He asked about the handkerchief and I told her that the owner of this dancing house did investigate and told me which girl the handkerchief belonged to. He demanded to see you but I can see the rage in his eyes so I lied that you went out. Did Li Gan find out the handkerchief belonged to Li Yan? How did he find out? I thought this was only between you and me? And didn't you burn that handkerchief already?"

"I don't know" as I lied to Hong Gu and fixed her hair. "From now on, you need to forget about the handkerchief and pretend it never happened. Never mention it again." She quieted and answered "I've already forgotten."

A maid come in bearing hot water and looking worried "Third master Li is still throwing things!" I laugh and tell Hong Gu not to worry "Whatever he destroys, I'll make him pay for it." She looked alarmed "How do you dare ask him? If he saw you, he'd probably toss you instead."

I laugh “Why would I ask him? A son’s mistake is for a father to rectify. I’ll ask General Li Guang, an honorable man, who would pay for it. If we deliver the bill to his estate, how could he not pay us?”

She thought for a moment and smiled “Li Gan’s two older brothers have already died young and General Li Guang was so saddened by it. Li Gan is especially filial towards his father and has never dared disobey his father. If General Li heard about this, no matter how angry Li Gan is, he won’t dare come again to cause a scene. Yu Er, you are so smart!”

I handed a lipstick to her “Just tally a list of the broken items and give it to me later.” I think to myself – Li Yan, I have no clue how you managed to fan the flames, but the fire has reached me now. So you’ll be paying for half of the broken items. General Li is a decent man and I don’t want to take advantage of him, so I’m putting this tab on you.

Chapter 13: Falling Petals

The first day of the New Year means happiness? Happiness my rear end! I'm controlling a bellyful of bad temper. Grandpa sees my furrowed brow and gives Xiao Feng a quizzical look, but Xiao Feng just shakes his head indicating that he doesn't know. I can't wait any longer so I bow to Grandpa and then rush off to the Bamboo Residence.

It is the first time I use my foot to open the door, giving off a bang and the door opens. Before I can say anything, Jiu Ye smilingly asks "Is it Xiao Yu?"

His voice is the best defuser and my hot temper suddenly deflates. I lower my foot and gently enters the room. He is sitting at the table, holding a bamboo and carving it. He puts down the bamboo and carving knife to welcome me in to sit down.

I sit down next to him and stare at the table. He asks "Are you angry?"

I remain silent, so he says "So not angry then? How was your New Year? Last night Tian Cao dragged me along with them....."

I furrow my brow and give a deathly glare at the table, but he continues nattering on and on, from when he arrived at the banquet, to toasting, to getting drunk, to.....

I've never seen him so talkative so I stare and ask "I'm angry, can't you tell? You should ask why I'm angry, and ask if you did anything wrong?"

He looks innocent and muffles his laughter "Oh! Why are you angry? Did I do anything wrong?"

I give a sigh of annoyance and flop on the table. Why is he so

clueless? What is it that I like about him? He has a weird personality, seemingly welcoming on the surface but really keeping people thousands of miles away. He does know a lot, but it's not like I want to marry a book. His identity is rather secretive, seemingly a Han citizen but perhaps plotting something against the Han Empire.....I keep trying to think of more bad qualities he possesses.

He looks hopeless "I asked but you won't answer, so what should I do now?" I angrily slap the table "You have no sincerity! You might as well not ask, and just keep talking about how much fun you had during the New Year!"

The room descends into silence, and I suddenly worry that he's angry at me. I raise my head to look at him and I see his open palm. Inside is a pair of gold and jade earrings "Is this sincere enough for you?"

I raise my head to look at him and pick up the earring. The gold represents the sand and the green is the water. Even though the Yue Ya Spring is but a small oasis in the desert, he managed to use my name (Jin Yu means gold jade) and find an even deeper meaning into the gift. We met in the golden desert, and almost got in a tussle outside the blue-green spring. The artisan who crafted this delicate piece is truly talented.

I study it and then put it on, with a stone face I say "Not bad. Seeing as how generous you are, I'll let this one slide."

I try to be serious but can't help myself and start laughing. He was looking at me but his eyes had a flash of concern, and then he averts his eyes.

Shi Yu comes in bearing two steaming bowls and places it before me. I look at it and murmur "You didn't call me so I thought you forgot and didn't keep your promise."

He doesn't say anything for a few moments before speaking in the softest of voices "How can I forget? No matter what, today is all about

making you happy.” I grab the bowl of noodles and reply indistinctly “Happy or not, it all depends on you.”

Finished with the birthday noodles, Jiu Ye chats with me and then picks up the bamboo and knife. I ask if he’s making a flute? He nods “This bamboo comes from a special mountain region where it has grown for ten years. No matter the weather change, the sound quality won’t change. It has a beautiful name, called “Xiang Fei Zhu” (Consort Xiang Bamboo). The sound is even more crystal clear than the average bamboo flute.”

I lean forward to look “So this is the famous bamboo! Looking at the spots on it, it resembles tears. It’s so pretty.”

Jiu Ye suddenly stiffens and then expertly distances himself from me. He laughs that if I want it, he’ll give it to me. He has a lot of flutes, but seeing this great material makes him itchy to make one himself. I laugh “I am someone who never rejects a present.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything else.

When I leave the Shi Estate, I run into Shen Xing and Tian Cao and I bow to them, wishing them a happy new year. Shen Xing sees my earrings but doesn’t comment on it, whereas Tian Cao keeps looking “Jiu Ye spent all that effort, so it was to give you a present.”

I touch the earrings and asks what he means? Tian Cao smiles “Jiu Ye learned jade artistry when he was young, but doesn’t practice every day. Because this was such a delicate piece, for this item, he even went to consult an expert for a few days. He wasted a lot of great pieces of jade to get it right. He is really talented with these pieces, from weapons to daily items, nothing he can’t make. Watching him make this, I realized then that the hardest thing in the world to make is a woman’s piece of jewelry.”

I dumbly ask “Do you’re saying Jiu Ye hand made this?” He just smiles at me and bows farewell. I stand there in a daze.

“I don’t know how old I am, but Li Yan is already pregnant and about to become a mom. I’m still here floating around. If there isn’t someone right for me, I won’t get married. But if there is someone right for me, I will seize the opportunity. If there is a chance of happiness before me and I don’t seize it, Papa will call me a fool. Am I a fool? Of course I’m not. I am the beautiful, smart, clever, and cute Jin Yu. So even if you are the floating cloud, I will capture you. You are who I like, right? You once said we are different, but I am working hard to read all the books you like. I believe I can be the same type of person as you. If you want to be the condor, I will be the wind to keep you afloat; if you are want of leaving this all behind, we can buy a few horses and disappear; thank god you don’t like Confucious, because I respect him but don’t particularly want to emulate him, though if you like him, I will try to behave myself....”

I bite down on the ink brush and look at the cloth. I am trying to cheer myself up, so how did my writing get so confusing? I’ve told myself many times that he will like me, he will like me..... I’m afraid to write more, so I write the date on the side and quickly put this cloth away.

.....

I shake for a good long while before a fortune telling stick pops out of the cannister. Huo Qu Bing reaches over and is about to grab it but I’ve already retrieved it. He asks “What are you wishing to know?” and I shake my head “Not telling you.”

He humphed “What could you possibly ask for? If it’s not business then it’s marriage. Right now your business is in the palm of your hands, why ask the fortune on that. So clearly it must be marriage.” I insist it’s not marriage.

A fortune stick reader is looking at me, and stands up when he sees me heading towards him. I suddenly stop and walk away. Huo Qu Bing laughs “Why are you not asking now?”

I hold the fortune stick in my hand and walk for some time before tossing it into the bushes. “Not asking anymore. He can tell another

person's fortune but not his own. He's dressed well and clearly is hoping to get paid well after telling me what I want to hear. Why doesn't he tell his own fortune, as to whether he can get my business?"

He laughs "As least you know when to stop, so that means you're not so desperate yet."

Thinking back, I feel so silly. But when I saw the sign that said "Telling Marriage Fortunes", my feet just walked me inside. Like someone who is really sick is willing to find any doctor. I feel silly now but still want to act like I'm not "I thought it was amusing and was just checking it out."

Huo Qu Bing looks at me with a smile and doesn't argue with further, letting me win this one. A gust of wind blew past and I breathed in the scent "It's so fragrant, what kind of flower is this?"

"It's the acacia."

I look at him sideways "Why did you call me out today? To go mountain climbing?"

He slowly walked "No reason. Can't I call you out? Just walking around, shopping, why don't you look at the acacia tree above you?"

I don't even hear the rest of what he was saying. All my attention is on the carriage in front of me. Huo Qu Bing looks at me and then follows my eyes to the carriage, which is stopped before an estate. I smile at him "I suddenly have something come up, so I need to leave now."

He grabbed me "Don't go!"

I force his hand away "I'll go find you another day and apologize for this." Before I finish I'm already drifting towards the carriage. Behind me he calls out "Xiao Yu!"

I don't turn around and continue walking forward, stopping besides the carriage. I knock on the carriage and Jiu Ye raises the curtains and smiles to see me "Why are you outside the city today?"

I hold his curtain up "Aren't you outside the city yourself?" I look at his assistant, so he smiles and explains "My grandmother's last name was Shi, her first name was Qing. This Qing Estate is a place where grandfather built for grandmother. I don't want to renovate it for wheelchair access, so it's not convenient for me to move about here."

I look at the estate and feel a sense of envy, to know there was a man who was so in love with his wife. I used to wonder why the family is named Meng but chose to name the business Shi Enterprises. And all the orphans adopted by the family have the last name Shi as well. Today I finally understand that the last name belonged to the woman his grandfather loved.

Jiu Ye gets off the carriage and uses a crutch, the one I saw in his study that day. Instead of looking awkward, he's elegant and graceful using it. Since it's the first time I've seen him standing, I stare at him.

He laughs "Is this really that weird?" and I quickly shake my head "No, no, it's that it looks so....good!"

He stared at me so I tried to explain "Hasn't anyone told you the impression you give? You.....you....your every gesture is very....." The more nervous I get the harder it is for me to find the right description. But I wanted to explain, worried that he would misunderstand why I kept staring at him.

He reached out and smoothed my wind blown hair and stared at me, saying gently "Yu Er, that's enough. I understand what you mean."

I smile at him and over his shoulder, I can see Huo Qu Bing standing there, looking at us from far away. My heart inexplicably lurched and I averted my eyes.

Jiu Ye walked with his crutch and explained how his grandfather built this estate to harness the natural hot springs of this region. He's here to soak in the hot springs, which is good for stimulating circulation. I sneak a peek at his legs, still not sure what his ailment is, though he doesn't walk with difficulty when using the crutch.

Before entering the estate, I look back and Huo Qu Bing still stands in the same spot. In the Spring air, the acacia is nearing the peak of it's blooming. A sea of white blankets the trees, and when a wind blows past, the petals swirl in the air like snow flakes. Normally he loves to be tidy, but he actually stands there without moving, letting the petals land on his head and his robe.

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The Lover's Vines are starting to sprout white buds, playing hide-and-seek with me so I have to search around to count how many have sprouted. I tell them to work extra hard this year, since I've put in earthworms and found extra fertilizer for them, to grow big and beautiful.

The vines lightly ripple in the wind, like it hears my plead "When you open big and beautiful, I'll bring him to meet you" and I lightly kiss a newly sprouted leaf "you guys work hard, and I will also work hard."

I enter the Bamboo Residence to be told that Jiu Ye is visiting Xiao Feng's grandpa at the Orchid Suite, but I can see his empty wheelchair in the yard. Tian Cao explains to me that Jiu Ye has one leg that has no strength, but his other leg is fine. If he used a crutch he can walk, though not far, but it's better for his circulation than sitting in a wheelchair all day.

He explains further that when they were kids, Jiu Ye always wanted to tag along despite his bad leg. But Tian Cao and the older boys didn't know better and was always devising tricks to shake him off. Jiu Ye figured out what they were doing and became more subdued and started burying his head in books more. One day Jiu Ye sneaked out with his crutch and returned late that night bloodied and bruised. He refused to explain what happened, only saying he fell.

They felt terrible and beat up every bully in Chang An before discovering what had happened. Jiu Ye had read Mo Zi and wanted to find a metal works in the city to discuss how to make weapons. As he walked, some kids taunted him for being a cripple and he got in a fight with them. Afterwards, when they wanted to take Jiu Ye out, he always refused and he also refused to use his crutch ever again in front of others.

Tian Cao asked if I blamed them, and I said no, especially if Jiu Ye didn't blame them. He was impressed with how straight forward I am. I explained "As long as I am doing well, and the people I care about are doing well, I won't hurt others for no reason. Is there something wrong with that?"

He quickly responded "Of course! And don't misunderstand, but we really are grateful to you. When Jiu Ye returned, he started using his crutch in front of others. You helped us relieve this huge burden in our hearts all these years."

I'm upset the assistant told everyone that I was there that day, and Tian Cao laughs that the way I was adoringly staring at Jiu Ye was also discussed, to everyone's amusement.

I got mad, which is when Jiu Ye came in on his crutch. I glare at Tian Cao and ask that the assistant be punished for being bad. Tian Cao promises that they are all so busy these days no one has time to gossip. Sheng Xing enters and is happy to see me, but Tian Cao pushes him out quickly, and soon it's just me and Jiu Ye in the courtyard.

My heart flutters, a sweetness within the awkwardness of the moment. Jiu Ye acts like nothing happened and wheels himself into the room. "The flute made from the Xiang Fei Zhu is done. It's already so elegant that carving more designs on it would be too much, so I decided to be lazy for once. Do you like it?"

I took the flute from him "I don't understand these things, so whatever you say must be good."

He laughs “You have a world famous musician in your dancing house, one that everyone would kill to learn from. Why don’t you ask him to teach you?”

I think about Li Yan Nian, and then think about Li Guan Li, causing me to wrinkle my brows. I tell Jiu Ye that Li Guan Li is like the saying “a dragon has nine sons, each of whom are different.” Jiu Ye tells me I can kick him out if he annoys me. He doesn’t know that I can’t kick him out because of Jiu Ye. He asks me about how fast my businesses are expanding, wondering why I’m doing all this? My heart is happy knowing that he’s keeping tabs on me, so I tell him that I have my own reasons.

He sits in silence for a few moments before talking “Yu Er, do you know why I don’t go outside on crutches? I use a wheelchair to let people think I am very weak, and even Tian Cao and those guys think I can’t walk very far. I am crippled and somewhat weaker, but I am not as weak as they believe.” I ask why he’s doing this act on purpose then?

Jiu Ye explains “I’m putting on this act for the Emperor. My mother was the grand niece of the Dowager Queen Bao, and when she was small she was always playing in the Palace. Back then the Emperor and my mother were close cousins. So when the Dowager Empress Bao was still alive, the Shi Enterprises and the Bao family were very close. When the Bao family fell from favor, the Emperor was wary of the Shi family’s wealth and power. So after mother and father died, and the family business ended up in my hands, if it wasn’t for the fact that I was a cripple, and the family businesses slowly bled money under my watch, there was no way I would not have been extinguished in Chang An.”

This is the first time he’s told me about his background so I listen in shock. I wonder how old he was when this happened, and how he had to shoulder the lives of so many people under the Shi family protection, and learn to survive with the Han Emperor watching his every move. He’s only explaining his family’s ties with the Han dynasty, but what about with Xi Yu? How heavy must that other burden be as well. Walking this road alone, how much has he endured?

He watched me and said slowly “Yu Er, the current Emperor is very calculating and decisive. When the time arrives, he can order anyone killed. So don’t do anything to go against the Imperial family. In Chang An, if you want to compete with other businesses, I can....still....” He swallowed what he wanted to say and finished with this. “Yu Er, please think carefully before you do anything.”

Chapter 14: Stargazing

“Bam!” I slam my chopsticks on the table “What is this? A perfectly fine steamed bun, why are you putting weird things in it?”

Hong Gu gave me an odd look and continued to eat her steamed bun “An acacia flower scented steamed bun is very fragrant, and I purposely told the kitchen to do it. A few days ago you got mad when I used acacia flowers to brew some tea. And today this steamed bun has offended you. What did the acacia do to you that the moment you see it, you flip your lid?”

I sit there in silence and stew while Hong Gu keeps eating and ignores me.

It’s not the acacia that offends me, it’s that I don’t want to think about the person standing under the acacia trees.

I lay in bed for a long time unable to go to sleep. I put on a robe and open the door. There are stars outside, and I see a black shadow figure standing next to the Lover’s Vines. I startle for a moment before immediately recognizing who it is. I am momentarily speechless.

Huo Qu Bing turns around and looks at me for a few moments before saying “You didn’t keep your promise. You said you would come find me in a few days, and til now you still haven’t come.”

I walked up to him in silence because I don’t know how to respond. I look at the Lover’s Vines, where one flower is starting to bloom. In excitement I yell out “Look! That flower is blooming, the first flower of the year.”

Huo Qu Bing gives the flower a side look “It appears that I’m the first person to see the flower bloom.”

I take a deep breath “It smells lovely, can you smell it?”

Huo Qu Bing answered “I missed the flowers blooming last year because I was in Xi Yu. But at least they are considerate, allowing the first flower to bloom for me.”

I smiled “I’ve never seen anyone as full of himself as you, assuming flowers would open just for you! It was just a coincidence is all.”

He stared at the flower, like there was a lot on his mind “Sometimes timing is everything. Some things, if it happened one step earlier, everything would be different.”

“One, two, three....” I bury my head in the flowers and count the buds. He was so amused he laughed “You aren’t planning on counting all those buds, are you?”

I laugh back “If I can’t count them, that would make me happier, because it means they are working hard to bloom.”

Huo Qu Bing asked “Why are they called Gold Silver Flowers? I see the white which looks like silver, but where is the gold? I play coy “I won’t tell you now. Come back in a few days to look at the flowers and you’ll see why.” He smiled “I’ll take that as an invitation then, an invitation from a beautiful woman is one I will definitely not miss.” I gasp “You are such a.....”

He suddenly grabbed my elbow and steered me outside “Tonight there is a sky full of stars, I’ll take you somewhere fun.” I hesitated but noticed that he was in a good mood, so I don’t have the heart to say no. I quietly follow behind him.

We went to Shang Lin Fan, an Imperial retreat with thirty-six different pavilions and residences on the premises. I ask which one we were going to, and he is amused that I’ve not been scared out of my wits to be here.

I tell him “If I get in trouble, I’ll be taking you down with me.” He stared at me “So are you staying we will live together and die together?” I scoff and ignore his crazy talk.

He takes me to Shen Ming Tai (The God’s Tower), the highest building in Shang Lin Fan. On top of the tower, one can see the entire Shang Lin Fan and half of the city of Chang An. Stargazing up there is likely comparable to watching the stars in the desert. I think about how the view doesn’t have any obstructions and a wide expansive vista, and immediately my heart is intrigued. We flip over walls and safely arrive there. Because no one lives there and it doesn’t house any valuables, there is no guard on duty, just the occasional guard walking by on his rounds.

I climb the stairs in the darkness with Huo Qu Bing. Before we arrive at the top, we heard the sound of two voices from above. We both stop and he whispers angrily “Now which bastard is that?”

I laugh “So only you can come here, but no one else can enjoy it? Since there is already someone, let’s go back!” He tells me “You find a place to hide while I go see which bastard it is and then kick him out.” I pulled at him but he was already at the top.

What a overlord! No wonder there isn’t a single person in Chang An who dares to piss him off. I look around and want to hide outside the window when he quietly returns. He takes my hand and immediately pulls me down the stairs. I want to ask him “Who is that upstairs that would make you hurry up and leave?” He replied “The Emperor.”

I smirk “So it’s that bastard the Emperor.” He gives me a warning look but I can see he’s trying hard not to laugh. I pull his hand “Let’s go up and check it out.”

“What is there to check out? If you get captured, I won’t help you.” He refused to move, so I tugged at his elbow and pleaded “It’s impossible to eavesdrop on the Emperor, so can we go up and listen. Plus he’s.....he will surely not notice us.” Huo Qu Bing looked at me and then sighed, pulling me up without another word.

Just like I suspected, Li Yan was there. Under a sky full of stars, Li Yan was sitting on Liu Che's lap, and Liu Che used his cape to wrap Li Yan tightly. He was casually sitting on the ground and the two of them were snuggled together, not saying a word.

Huo Qu Bing whispered in my ear "There is nothing to overhear, but perhaps there will be a peep show to see....." I glare at him and give him a pinch. He grabbed me and then bit my ear. The two of us were tightly pressed against each other. I can't yell out or struggle, so I just reach for his hand. Initially he thought I was going to try something so his hand was tense and on guard. Seeing that I just held his hand and lightly shook it, he was silent for a moment before the strength in his hand went away. He tenderly kissed my ear lobe and released me. I lightly tripped because my body was tingling, so in that moment I felt weak-kneed. When I gathered my wits and wanted to get him back for that, I heard Liu Che tenderly say "The Palace residence is higher than this. After you give birth and can move about freely, let's go up there and look over the entire Chang An city."

I hurry to hear how Li Yan responded "That Palace is where all the hundreds of ministers pay fealty to my lord husband. As your wife I dare not go." Li Yan and Liu Che's privately converse like they are a normal husband and wife couple. He does not refer to himself as the Emperor, and she does not call herself his consort wife. Huo Qu Bing, who is pressed tightly behind me, lets out a long sigh. I lightly squeeze his hand.

Liu Che laughs out loud "If I say you can go, you can go. Who dare object." Li Yan wraps her arms around Liu Che's neck and kisses him "Your majesty taking your consort wife here to look at the view, your consort wife is already very happy. The most important thing is that there is just the two of us. You are my husband and I am your wife. Oh, and your child. Our entire family is here and that is all I ask for. The Emperor may want to make me happy, but I don't want your majesty ever to frown. I don't want people to use my visit there as fodder for political conversation. I don't want you to be unhappy, I want you to always smile."

Liu Che was silent for a few moments before saying "I feel the same way about you" before pulling Li Yan tightly into his embrace.

Li Yan, Li Yan, this man cherishes you without any reservation or hesitation. Can you protect your heart? Is this real or playacting? I can't tell, so how can you be certain yourself? Are you plotting a battle with each step, or stepping ever deeper into the abyss with each step?

I want to listen more, but remembering Huo Qu Bing, decide it's enough. I pull his hand to indicate that we should leave. As we are turning, my skirt gets caught and the sound of ripping renders the silent night.

Liu Che roared "Who is it?"

I was frantic and looked at Huo Qu Bing, but he shook his head indicating I needn't worry, he was here. He pulled me up on the tower roof.

"Your servant I wanted to come view the stars on this clear night, and didn't realize we would be thinking the same thing. Apologies for interrupting your majesty's and your highness' enjoyment. Your majesty did not bring a servant, so you must have snuck here alone as well?" Huo Qu Bing bowed to the Emperor with a twinkle in his eye.

Huo Qu Bing brushed aside the sneaking into Imperial grounds, and made it seem like running into the Emperor here was just coincidence because they both had the same idea. Liu Che has no way to response other than let it go. He smiled when he saw me, then said to Huo Qu Bing "I haven't chastised you, and here you are asking me questions. Looks like we have other ideas in common as well tonight, in addition to what you just said."

I bowed deeply to the Emperor and then went to stand behind Huo Qu Bing. Liu Che lets go of Li Yan, who stands up and gives me a dead eyed stare, and then looks towards the ground. I sigh inside, thinking of how to explain this to Li Yan.

Liu Che addressed me "Since you are here to stargaze, don't just look at the ground, boldly look around. I heard you were raised in Xi Yu, so at least you should be more carefree." I lower my head and answer yes, then

look up at a distance, despite not really seeing anything.

Li Yan tenderly says “Your majesty, we have enjoyed the views, we should be going now. I am feeling tired.” Liu Che looks at Li Yan’s protruding belly and quickly got up “It is time to go. You guys can have this spot.” He smiles at Huo Qu Bing and then picks up his lantern, leaving with Li Yan.

Huo Qu Bing and I kneel to send the Emperor off. When Liu Che reaches the staircase, he suddenly turns to Huo Qu Bing with a smile “I’ll let you off the hook this time, but you will come explain everything to me in a few days.” Huo Qu Bing smiled “Your servant will obey.”

Li Yan suddenly mentioned how she’s going to view the lilies in the pond in a few days and wants me to accompany her. I quickly answer that I will obey her request.

After they leave, Huo Qu Bing pulls me up “When you see the Emperor, you are more docile than when a rabbit sees a tiger.”

I walk to the edge and lean on the railing “How should I behave when I see the Emperor? Talk freely?” He leaned on the railing next to me “This is good. There are lots of docile women in the Palace and the Emperor is sick of them. Li Yan retains a woman’s tenderness but has some steel in her backbone and a bit of wildness, which is what attracts the Emperor.”

I ask if he’s alright and he smiles “I am constantly in and out of the Palace, and it’s not that I haven’t seen the Emperor close with one of his wives. But for you, an unmarried girl, to see this....” I glare at him “You know I wasn’t asking about this.”

He looked out into the distance “Like I said, I’ve seen the Emperor with many women. But this is the first time I’ve seen him sitting silently with a woman, just embracing each other. Nothing more. And this is the first time I’ve heard the Emperor talk to a wife in in first person without the honorifics. I was just shocked initially.”

He sighed "The Emperor is just a man, and sometimes he needs a woman to just see him as an equal, because so many people revere him. My aunt isn't bad, but her personality is much too gentle and docile. Years ago, under the control of Dowager Queen Bao, the Emperor didn't know if he could retain his throne. And his first Queen had a bad temper, unreasonable and spoiled. With his frustrations back then, he needed a woman like my aunt, someone who worshipped him with her very being. But now the Emperor is full of power and strength, at the prime of his rule, now he needs a woman who he can sit and laugh with, and who will sometimes give him a bit of temper."

I laugh "You always speak up for the Emperor, no wonder he values you so much." He laughed "How many Emperor's were faithful in history. This my aunt already knows, so it's not a big deal. Today there is Consort Li. In the future there will be Consort Wang and Consort Zhao. So why get upset about it."

Like he said, there is no hundred day flower in the Palace harem. If it wasn't Li Yan, another woman will catch the Emperor's fancy. If Li Yan doesn't interfere, then no one will mind her. But if she gives birth to a boy, she will want to stop the Han encroachment on Xi Yu by putting her son on the throne. At that time, the battle between the Li family and the Wei family will surely be unavoidable. For the first time, my head hurts and I sigh.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I shake my head and look at the stars. Tonight we sit side by side stargazing, will we one day become enemies? If this tenderness will one day become a shattered memory, then I want to treasure this very moment.

I laugh and point "Do you know where the milky way came from?" He scoffed "Even though I don't like reading, but I have heard the story of the cow herd and the weaver girl. That is the cow herd star. Can you find the weaver girl star?" I look carefully and point, but he shakes his head. I point at another and he shakes his head again. I point at a third and say this must be it, otherwise he's mistaken.

He bops me over the head “You’re the stupid one and you question me? In the army we need to use the stars to determine our position. Before I could even walk I was sitting on my uncle’s lap recognizing the stars.”

I rub my head and ask “I’m stupid? You’re not smart either. Only when an idiot looks at another idiot do they like each.....” I don’t finish and just shut my mouth. I’m like a fat pig running into a butcher’s shop, looking to be slaughtered. Why did I mention that?

Huo Qu Bing leans on the railing and looks at me, with a half smile. His staring is making me nervous so I pretend to be calm and look back up at the sky “What about that one?” He lightly laughed “Your face is red.” I retort “It’s the Summer right now, and I’m hot, okay?”.....

The beautiful scenery, with stargazing such an enjoyable experience. Our two voices appear to be drifting under the sky full of stars, with the stars twinkling as if it is secretly smiling.

.....

I walk with Li Yan by the lake shore and tell her that my saving the Grand Duke in the desert was by coincidence and I didn’t know his identity. And running into her stargazing was also a coincidence. There is nothing going on between us. She has a slight smile “You may not have something going on with him, but he clearly has something going on with you. Everyone knows his temper, with his eyes on the top of his head. But when he looks at you, his eyes stay right where they are.” I try to explain that I saved his life and he’s just polite towards me.

She looked at me “I heard you hired a teacher for my second brother. Even though you don’t hold a contract to Fang Ru’s life, but she feels indebted to you, and will not leave until you say so. If she doesn’t leave, then my big brother will keep waiting for her. Plus the Princess, and Li.... Everyone appears to be a chess piece for you. Jin Yu, what exactly do you want?”

I silently think to myself that I don't want riches or power, what I want is more simple than anything out there. I just want to be with Jiu Ye. If Jiu Ye is willing to leave Chang An, then I can throw everything here away and leave with him. But he won't, so I have no choice but to stay here, and do what I can to be a big tree and help block him from the rain and the wind. I don't want to be a flower seeking shelter under his branches. If the flower is a woman at her most seductive, then I still would rather be a stolid tree. That way I can alleviate some of his burdens.

Li Yan knows that I run the dancing houses but always come up with new fashions and hairstyles that the ladies want to copy. Plus I've opened some salons for only the rich ladies and wives to sip tea, and it is there I'm likely the recipient of all the salient gossip in Chang An about the political tide. I see that Li Yan is aware of what is happening outside the Palace, which means she is starting to get support inside the Palace to pass her this information. I commend her on seeing through what I thought was a very subtle plan of mine.

Her eyes twinkle "It's because you are Jin Yu, and I always need to be wary of you. What do you really want?"

I promise that whatever I do, our goals will not be in conflict. She used to think so, but seeing me with Huo Qu Bing, she's not so sure anymore. While everyone is a chess piece for me, why does it seem like I've purposely ignored the largest chess piece – Huo Qu Bing.

"I...I..." I cannot explain, having no reason that Li Yan would believe. This is the first time I'm realizing that as I am planning, he's completely slipped by. I really forgot about using him. I give a bitter laugh "I don't have a good reason. Perhaps it is because this chess piece is too valuable, so I won't use it lightly."

I tell Li Yan that the Yue Ren Ge she taught me before she entered the Palace, I learned it to play for the Big Boss of the Shi Enterprises. Does she believe now that nothing is going on between me and Huo Qu Bing? She looks at me and then asks me to make an oath to her. I refuse, I cannot promise I will never become her enemy. What if she hurts me first? That

was not the oath she wanted. She wanted me to swear on the life of the person I love that I will never ever divulge her background. I am angry, but I agree to swear an oath on life of the man I love that I will never reveal her identity. She points to the sky, that the Gods have heard me.

She tells me not to hate her. She is walking an exhausting road. Empress Wei controls the back Palace harem, with General Wei and General Gong Xun on the outside, and now added to it is Huo Qu Bing. Li Yan might have the Emperor's favor now, but who knows how long that will last. While Empress Wei seems benign and gentle, she can afford to be because other people do her dirty work for her. We walk until suddenly a man calls out a greeting to her highness Consort Li.

We turn and see Li Gan. Third master Li might not be as flashy and radiant as Huo Qu Bing, he's still the ideal catch for all the ladies in Chang An. Huo Qu Bing's aura is too bright, too strong, making it hard for people to get close, having no clue where he's headed. Li Gan is like a mountain, giving ladies a feeling of security.

He smiles to see me, asking if I remember him from last year when Huo Qu Bing brought me to the army barracks. I tell him I remember, and that I am here today at the summons of Consort Li. Li Yan tells Li Gan that I am the owner of Luo Yu Fan. His eyes sudden turn dark and ominous, shooting daggers at me. I avoid his gaze and turn to see Consort Li, who makes it clear she isn't always going to be manipulated by me, it's time I tasted my own medicine.

I glared at her and decided to pretend to be clueless. We both notice that Li Gan's sleeve has the same "Li" character embroidered directly on it. While Li Gan looks like he is furious, Li Yan has tenderness in her eyes, while I plaster on a happy smile.

Huo Qu Bing's cold voice rings out "Li San (Third Li), what are you looking at?" From his angle all he can see is Li Gan staring at me, but he can't tell the look Li Gan is shooting me. He can only see my happy smile, but doesn't know my internal struggle with Li Yan right now.

Li Gan wants to explain but can't, how can he explain that he hates me right now because of Li Yan. Huo Qu Bing's expression grows colder, wondering what it is that Li Gan can't explain, likely thinking really far off conjectures.

The situation is so ridiculous and awkward that Li Yan and I have no choice but to collapse in laughter against each other. Even Li Gan has no choice but to shake his head and laugh, leaving Huo Qu Bing watching us laughing oddly.

Liu Che and Princess Pingyang arrive and ask why we are all laughing. Li Yan looks at me and says that I told a funny joke. I punt the ball and say I was merely retelling the joke I heard from Master Li, who should be the one to tell it now. Everyone looks at Li Gan while Huo Qu Bing stares at me with icy precision. I wrinkled my brows at him, that silly idiot. How could I have had any opportunity to hear a joke from Li Gan.

Li Gan thinks for a moment and then tells the joke, which does meet with enjoyment. Though his joke was really a jab at me, discussing how crafty people who want to achieve their own selfish goals will sacrifice others for their own gain. When Li Gan is talking, Li Yan keeps looking at his sleeve and shooting me pleading looks. She feigns tiredness and is escorted by the Emperor off to rest at the nearby pavilion.

We follow behind, with the Princess talking with Huo Qu Bing, while Li Gan and I take up the rear. Huo Qu Bing shoots me a deathly glare and I give him another brow wrinkle and ignore him. As we neared the pavilion, I slip right next to Li Gan and reach for him. He is adept at martial arts and has a great reflex, immediately avoiding me. But I was expecting his move so I went the other way, and since I also know martial arts, my hand is able to grab onto his sleeve. With a loud rip, the sleeve tears and everyone turns to look at us. The expression on Huo Qu Bing's face could not be more furious.

Li Gan angrily points at me while I profusely apologize. I drop his sleeve on the ground and step on it during my apology, until the Li character is no longer recognizable.

Huo Qu Bing suddenly hollered “What are you two doing? Is this a place for you guys to be pushing and pulling?” Li Gan finally understands why I purposely tore his sleeve, and he and I immediately get on our knees to beg forgiveness from the Emperor. Li Yan wants to ask for us as well, but the Emperor is in a good mood and chats with the Princess about his mishaps in his youth. Liu Che looks from Huo Qu Bing to me to Li Gan and tells us to get up, and tells Li Gan to go change. Li Gan gets up and smoothly picks up his sleeve before leaving.

Princess Pingyang laughs that the Emperor is totally biased towards Qu Bing and got rid of Li Gan so quickly. Liu Che laughs and looks at the stone-faced Huo Qu Bing “If I don’t get rid of Li Gan now, should I wait until they start fighting. At which time I can’t punish them, and I can’t not punish them.” The Princess laughs that with Qu Bing’s temper, he’d totally do that.

A potentially dangerous situation is averted and I’m tired. Li Yan looks odd so the Emperor has her sent to rest and we are all excused. Huo Qu Bing walks next to me but doesn’t say a single word. I am thinking about what I discussed with Li Yan, and with a mind full of worries, I’m also stone-faced.

Once we exit the woods, I bow to him so that I can leave, and he angrily says “I’ll take you home.” I tell him it’s not necessary, I’m headed somewhere else first. He jumps in the carriage and orders me inside, with a look that brokers no argument. I laugh and jump in, knowing I have no choice. “Don’t be mad at me, I’m going to General Li’s estate.”

He glared at me and ordered the carriage driven there. I look at him and put myself in his position, feeling a tinge of pain for him, so I softly explain “I am not close to Li Gan. I met him for the first time when you brought me to the Yu Lin Army barracks, and this is the second time we’ve met.”

His face softens but his voice is still cold “The second time you’ve met and you behave this way?” I reply “There was a reason. To me, Li Gan is a small peanut. When my eyes are tired, I wouldn’t be able to pick him out of

a crowd.”

He has a slight smile on his lips “What about me?” I hesitated and answered “You’re like a big doofus, is that okay?” He didn’t smile and immediately followed with “What about Meng Jiu?” My face froze and I turned to look outside, two piercing eyes staring a hole in the back of my head.

When we arrive at General Li’s estate, Huo Qu Bing just walks in, clearly used to being here. I ask why he’s following since I’m going to see Li Gan. Huo Qu Bing replies “It looks like you are following me, not me following you. If you want, you can return to the front door and have a servant announce you.”

I glare at him and follow him silently. He finds out from a servant that Li Gan is practicing archery in the practice yard, and Huo Qu Bing heads over there without needing any directions.

Li Gan is shooting arrows in the archery field. His every release is powerful, the arrow thundering into the center of the target. I marvel at his prowess, clearly a descendant of a great military family. Li Gan turns and sees me, and he points the arrow in his hands towards me.

In that moment I know Li Gan is not just trying to scare me. His face is thunderous and cold, with deep hatred within his eyes. He really wants to kill me. My body freezes and I can’t move and can’t talk. I’m afraid that the slightest movement will upset him and his arrow will come flying towards me. The world famous archery skills of this family, I doubt I can avoid it. Huo Qu Bing makes a quick move and he’s blocking me. His attitude is cold and he faces off with Li Gan.

Li Gan’s hand shakes for a moment before he turns and sends his arrow flying into the target, hitting dead center. The force is so strong that the arrow passes clean through the target, leaving only a bit of white feather remaining on the board.

I finally release my pent up breath and my body grows weak. I am a lowly person, and to these rich and powerful people, I am like an ant they can easily extinguish if they wanted. I kept using my mind to strategize, but I forgot that one arrow can easily end my life. All my tactics are nothing in the face of this situation.

Thank god Huo Qu Bing followed me here today, or else..... I wasn't scared during that moment, but now I'm scared. Did Li Yan anticipate Li Gan's response? Was this her warning to me? Or perhaps she wants me dead? Who can keep a secret better than a dead person?.....

The more I think about it, the more scared I become. Huo Qu Bing turns and supports me, and this is the first time I have reached for his hand. His hand tightly grasps mine. Because he's practicing martial arts and riding a horse year round, his hands are calloused. The rough feel gives off a sense of security and comfort. My heart calmed down and my hands stopped fidgeting.

He saw that I was back to normal and shook his head with a smile "Now see if you dare come here to find Li Gan?" I can't even smile so I whisper "Why won't I dare? But next time....do follow me again."

Li Gan walked up to her and acted like nothing happened. He bowed to Huo Qu Bing "I apologize for earlier, but you suddenly walked in front of my aim and caused me a fright."

Huo Qu Bing coldly answered "Third brother, we grew together in the Yu Lin Army. When I was small First brother taught me archery. We have had a great friendship. I don't want to let any misunderstanding turn us into enemies. So I will tell you today – if you ever treat her this way again, my archery skills are no worse than yours."

I stare at Huo Qu Bing in shock, this indescribable feeling in my heart, knowing that he's protecting me without reservation. Li Gan is also shocked but quickly understands, turning towards me with a bitter smile "I lost my temper a little today, and it won't happen again. Will Ms. Jin please forgive me?"

I almost smirked. Can I understand him? Let me try to stick a knife to your neck and then ask for your understanding. I lightly murmured "I came here to say a few words." Huo Qu Bing considerably walked away to give us some privacy.

I looked at Li Gan "Consort Li came from my dancing house, and everything I do is to protect her. I think you can see this after what happened today. You must believe me. I know you like her, but does she know how you feel?"

He was quiet for awhile and then shook his head "She doesn't know. She is already an Imperial Consort. I am just an official in her eyes. And I don't want her to know. What I feel for her is just some of my private feelings."

Just like I suspected, Li Yan is pretending like she knows nothing and pushing all the blame on me. I think and then say "I promise that I will not tell Consort Li." He coldly huffed "Years ago, you concealed what you should have told her, so I can trust you on doing this. But I met her before the Emperor did, but because of you, I ended up late to the party. Being late by even one step means a lifetime's regret, do you know that?" His sadness was mixed with rage once again.

I was afraid to continue his words "Since I concealed it from you, how did you know that Consort Li was the woman you were looking for?"

He looked pained yet also happy "In the Palace, one day I accidentally saw her using the same handkerchief. It was a different color, but the design was the same. I was stunned and kept staring at her. I realized how silly I was, other than her, there could not be another woman with the same beauty. I was initially just stunned by her dancing on the lake, and impressed with how she engaged the Emperor's attention. Back then I refused to acknowledge my feelings, until I saw the handkerchief and realized my missed opportunity. You caused all of this to happen. Ms. Jin Yu, why did you purposely lie to me? If the Heavens wanted me to see the "Li" character again, why did it have to be too late. How can I not hate you?"

My body is cold. I didn't dare tell him the truth back then so that this would not happen. Any beautiful woman, having a chance with a man like Li Gan who adores her wholeheartedly, would have picked him over the Emperor and his thousands of women. But Li Yan is not an ordinary woman, she would never choose Li Gan. But things moved in a circle and fate brings it all back to the same spot. I'm afraid to look into his eyes and I murmur "Things are what it is and is impossible to change. I beg of you, please don't hurt Consort Li. Do you know that the "Li" character on your sleeve today could have caused what havoc? It's a very distinct "Li" character that once seen will not be forgotten. I don't know if the Emperor has seen it. You cannot ever put Consort Li in such danger."

He sounded despondent "I won't hurt her. Today it was just my carelessness and I wore the wrong outfit. I will go and burn all my clothes embroidered with this "Li" character. From now on, the character will live only in my heart."

I hurry and bow to him before running towards Huo Qu Bing. He asked "The both of you looked ashen back there. What did you do to piss off Li Gan?" I forced a laugh "Just a misunderstanding, which has been cleared up." Huo Qu Bing stared at me and didn't say anything. His dark eyes remain deep in thought.

Chapter 15: A Date

Li Yan safely gives birth to a boy, which Emperor Wu of Han names Bo. He also greatly rewards Princess Pingyang, Li Yan Nian and Li Guang Li. At a time when the crown prince is not set, everyone in court is starting to speculate whether the eldest son birthed by Queen Wei Liu Ju can ascend to the Eastern Palace, or will it be the beloved Liu Bo.

Because the Wei family is so powerful, Liu Ju might have the advantage, but that may not be the case. The Wei family rose to prominence because of the Emperor's love for Queen Wei, but the same thing can happen to the Li family. Plus Liu Ju's personality is vastly different than his father, who might one day disfavor him.

While the court is abuzz, the Wei family remains calm. General Wei Qing even enters the Palace to personally congratulate Li Yan on the birth of Liu Bo. When Liu Bo is one month old, the Emperor suddenly summons all and announces that Liu Ju will be the Crown Prince. It's sudden but not a surprise, since the battle rages with the Xiong Nu and he needs the support from the Great General Wei, General Gong Xun He, and Huo Qu Bing. If Liu Ju wasn't the Crown Prince, there would be no reason for these great warriors to fight for the Emperor.

During this time, Li Yan suddenly falls ill and is in a coma for three days and three nights, only saved by the attention of the royal physicians. Liu Che was so nervous and worried he did everything he could, including summoning me to the Palace to whisper in Li Yan's ear to see if she can stir. I whisper her name, and when we are alone, I tell her "Li Yan, how can you abandon your new born baby. You still have a chance, why are you giving up?"

When Li Yan softly stirs, Liu Che is ecstatic and shows his genuine affection for her. I think to myself, this man who rules the world loves this woman and is genuinely afraid of losing her. When she wakes up and sees him, she whispers "I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to see you again." and then she kisses him on the palm of his hand. I walk outside thinking to myself "Li Yan, did you really get sick. Or did you make yourself sick?"

When I return to Luo Yu House, I'm exhausted but find Li Gan waiting for me. He looks devastated and I tell him not to worry, Li Yan is awake and with some rest for a few months should recover. His worry eases, but I can see what ails him, having to wait here for news when she's fighting for her life, unable to help her.

The sun sets and the room turns dark. He remains sitting and not moving, so I try to keep myself awake. After a long time, he speaks "If this is her wish, then I will do everything in my power to make it come true for her. As long as she doesn't get sick again."

I lean back and sigh. Li Yan, if this illness was a coincidence, then the Gods are looking out for you. This illness caused a steely man to feel apologetic, and another to vow fealty to you and help you seek the throne for your son. Li Gan is the Li family's only heir, and his decision will surely determine the direction the family throws its support behind. If this was no coincidence, then your methods make my heart shudder. You just became a mother, and yet you can gamble with your life. A person who is so ruthless towards herself? My heart starts to feel afraid.

Li Gan and I are both deep in our own thoughts when the door suddenly opens and we both stand up in a hurry. Huo Qu Bing stares at us with a solemn expression. Li Gan and I, a man and a woman, alone in one room, that's bad enough already, but we didn't even light a lamp and appeared to be staring at each other in the darkness. This indeed looks very odd and hard to explain.

Li Gan sees Huo Qu Bing's expression and smiles a bit. He shakes his head at me, bows to Huo Qu Bing, and then walks out without saying a word. Huo Qu Bing tries to control his temper and asks "When did you two become so close? You've been in the Palace for so long, and yet you didn't even rest."

I haven't slept in two days and two nights and I'm exhausted right now. I tried to stay awake because of Li Gan, but now I don't care anymore. I flopped back on the pallet and pulled the blanket over myself "I'm so tired. Let me sleep first and then you can punish me later if you

want.”

Huo Qu Bing hesitated and then smiled. He walked over to the pallet and sat down. In my drowsy state, I head him whispering in my ear “You are that comfortable around me? But I don’t quite trust myself. What if I can’t control myself, maybe.....maybe I will.....take you.....” His breath glances over my cheek and his lips are barely brushing my skin. I’m so sleepy that I’ve fallen into the sweet abyss of slumber, not thinking anymore.

When I wake up, it’s past noon. I look around and suddenly remember the low voice whispering in my ear. I am stunned and immediately sit up. I look down and my clothes are intact, only my shoes have been removed and placed on the floor.

I sit there in silence, there is no one next to me. Was that a dream?

.....

The Lover’s Vines don’t disappoint me, a vast growth of silver and gold flowers that leave even the gardener in awe, not sure how I managed to grow it. It was easy really, I just talked to it every day, begging it to grow. Perhaps flowers can understand human emotions, knowing how much I’m longing for that man’s arrival, so it grants my wish.

Jiu Ye is in his wheelchair while I am behind him. We are strolling but my heart feels like bursting. I don’t hear Jiu Ye’s question and need to be reminded by Xiao Feng that he’s talking to me. I chat with him and we arrive at my courtyard. I make a face at Xiao Feng, who announces he’s off to explore the rest of Luo Yu House now. Jiu Ye lets him go, and Xiao Feng makes a money sign towards me first before running off.

The fragrance of the flowers hit us the moment I open the door. He asks if I’ve planted Gold Silver Flowers but I’m too nervous to answer. An entire garden of Lover’s Vines in the sun glistening with gold, silver, and green, captivating and enchanting. He admires them and commends me on

doing such a superb job of growing them.

I stare at the flowers before calming myself down “Do you know this flower has another name?” He was silent for a long time “In the Winter the leaves remain green, so it’s also called “Enduring Winter”.”

I smile sadly “Why are you avoiding the other name? Because the twisting flowers look like lovers dancing, so people also call them Lover’s Vines.”

He laughed “I momentarily forgot and just remember their medicinal name. You didn’t ask me here today just to look at flowers. Lets go see the willows growing by the lake. Let’s go walk by the lake.”

I grab his hand, which is about to wheel away “I really just invited you here to view the flowers. I don’t care if you think I am being bold and shameless. I need to tell you how I feel. I planted these Lover’s Vines for you two Falls ago. It’s almost two years now, Jiu Ye. I....I like you. I want to marry you. I want to always be able to view these flowers with you. And not just me all alone watching these lovers dancing on the vines.”

His hand shakes, cold as ice, and he stares into my eyes. I see the pain and the fear, all the complicated emotions tied together. I don’t understand. My hand holding his is starting to get cold. I plead with him silently: I have given my heart to you. Please treasure it. Please. Treasure. It.

Jiu Ye suddenly jerks his hand out of mine and avoids my eyes. He starsd ahead at the Lover’s Vines and spoke clearly, like every word needs all his strength to get out “I am not used to viewing flowers with anybody. I’m sure you’ll find someone to view flowers with you.”

My heart crashed on the ground, the second it hit shattering into pieces. My hand is still outstretched and suspended in the air. It’s like I want to grab onto something, but my hand touches nothing, placed in an odd position.

He tried to wheel himself away but it's like his arms have no strength so he doesn't move. I grabbed his sleeve "Why? Has it been just me all this time? You have no feelings for me? What are you afraid of? Your leg? I don't care about these things, Jiu Ye. How far a person walks in their lifetime is not determined by their legs, but by their heart."

He turned his head and refused to look at me. He pulled his sleeve out of my hand and kept repeating over and over "Yu Er, you are so wonderful. There is bound to be someone who is willing to view the flowers with you."

I watched as his sleeve disappeared from my hand little by little, and I cannot stop it. So there is something in this world harder to capture than a passing cloud.

An icy cold voice rings from behind us "There is indeed someone who is willing to view flowers with her."

I remain frozen on the spot and continue staring at my hand. How can he be so cruel as to push it away? Time and time again. So the biggest sadness isn't heartbreak, it's unending despair.

Huo Qu Bing walks up to Jiu Ye "Meng Jiu of Shi Enterprises?" His face is ashen but his stance proud and arrogant.

Jiu Ye acknowledges him with a very conflicted expression, his face turning whiter "Yu Er, your friend is here, so I'll be going now" and wheeled himself away.

Huo Qu Bing spoke up "My name is Huo Qu Bing" and Jiu Ye stopped for a moment, before continuing on his way. He murmured "I've long heard of your reputation, what a pleasure it is to meet you today" without turning back.

"He's gone already" Huo Qu Bing lightly told me. I still don't move, so he grabs me. I jerk my hand out of his and roars at him "I don't need you to concern yourself with my business. Who told you to enter my house?"

Get out!”

His hands suddenly fisted and he punched the vines “Don’t forget you asked me to come view the flowers. Lover’s Vines? You only told me it was called Gold Silver Flowers.”

A few of the bamboo sticks snap, and the Lover’s Vines in front of me shudder and then collapse. A sudden loud roar later, the entire vine patch has fallen in a flurry of gold and silver.

I stand there staring disbelieving. How could it collapse? Two years I’ve carefully tended to it. How did it fall so easily? Did the dream just evaporate?

I glared at Huo Qu Bing, who also looked stunned. He was staring at the vines with confusion in his eyes “Yu Er, look at these complicated intertwining vines? Don’t you think it’s just like life.”

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I asked the gardener to try and save the Gold Silver Flowers, but the main vine has been damaged and the flowers continue to wilt one after another, with the leaves turning yellow. I watched them slowly die before me. The things I believed in my heart was also slowly dying.

Hong Gu tries to convince me to see the Shi family members, and even the ill Wu Ye tries to meet with me, but I refuse to see anyone. I took a bucket of water and splashed on the vines, apologizing for them suffering because of our complicated lives. Hong Gu says Shi Enterprises is her master and boss, and right those three heads are outside waiting for me for an entire day already, which is unheard of.

I finally allow them inside. I bow to Tian Cao, Sheng Xing, and Jing Yen, and they ask if I’m drawing a clear boundary with them now. I take a deep breath, my throat hoarse “Jiu Ye would rather lose money on his businesses but he insists on repaying my money right now. It appears that

the Shi Enterprises is the one who wants to make a clear boundary with me.”

They have nothing to say to that, but Jing Yen pipes up “Xiao Yu, what happened between you and Jiu Ye? He was fine coming here, but when he got home his face was ashen like he got sick. He’s locked himself in his study for days now, only telling us to repay your loan immediately.”

My hand clenches and my nail digs into my palm. They look at each other and tell me they understand how hard it is for me. The normally taciturn Sheng Xing suddenly speaks up “Xiao Yu, give Jiu Ye more time. A lot of emotional knots can’t get untangled in a day or two.”

I shake my head “I tried to hint at him but he keeps evading me. I try to get close but he keeps letting me get close before violently pushing me away. I ask myself why, but I can never read his expression. It’s not so simple. If it wasn’t for his legs, I would have told him long ago how I feel. But he still keeps pushing me away. I’m just a girl, and I’m telling you all this today. You grew up with him, do you know why?”

They look solemn and finally Sheng Xing answers “We cannot tell you why.....perhaps.... We know Jiu Ye treats you differently. We grew up with him, these things we can tell at least. He really treats you differently. Can you please give him more time, please give him another chance?”

I laughed and laughed. When a person hurts so much they can’t cry, they just laugh. But it’s a laugh that sounds worse than crying ” Please leave now, I’m tired and need to rest.”

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Last Fall I collected a lot of Gold Silver Flower seeds, but this Fall all I have is a dead vine. Huo Qu Bing watches as I take an ax to the patch, slowly hacking away at the dead vines. “It’s all wilted, why are you even doing this?”

I answer “The gardener says that if I protect the stem, it might grow again next Spring.”

“I shouldn’t have taken out my temper on them the other day.”

I give him an odd look, with a biting sarcasm I ask “Are you apologizing to them now? The all-powerful young master Huo actually admitting he did something wrong? If news of this got out, it would shock the entire Chang An city to death.”

He looked angry “You walk around all day with a pissed off face, clearly you think I did something wrong.”

I lower my head and keep hacking at the dead vines “It’s like the Sun is rising from the West, I don’t know how to react.”

“Yu Er!” Huo Qu Bing suddenly shouted “I’m going to Xi Yu next year. If you’re not happy in Chang An, come with me for a visit to Xi Yu.”

His eyes are deep dark pools, hiding so much inner thoughts like the pitch black night. I feel it pressing down on my heart and making it hurt a little, not sure if it’s for him or for me. It’s almost three years since I last saw Brother Wolf. Is he doing well? Visiting Brother Wolf is a good idea, and it is time that I think about where I’m headed in the future. My sorrow may have no end, but life continues to go on.

“I can’t promise you now, I still have some things to handle here. If everything is taken care of, I might go back to Xi Yu.”

He smiled and nodded his head “At least it’s better than your outright rejection last year.”

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The Teacher inside is discussing General Bai Qi of the Qin dynasty

and his decision over one hundred years ago during a battle to offer surrender to the soldiers of the Zhao Kingdom, only to renege after they had surrendered, burying 40,000 soldiers alive. This ended up costing the Qin Empire even more pain because no one would surrender after wars, so every battle dragged on. One student disagrees. If General Bai had not killed those able bodied men, causing the entire Zhao Kingdom to surrender, the battle would have waged on and more people would have suffered. In the long run, he likely saved more lives of the Qin people.

The discussion goes on as students take both sides of the argument, while Li Guang Li naps off to the side. The Teacher has long given up on him, but the students I selected to study with him are doing marvelously. The extraordinary rise of the Great General Wei has students these days dreaming of their own successes based on talent and merit. I may have planned these chess pieces, but will I end up using it?

Fang Ru comes with snacks and we go inside, everyone happy to see us. The student all crowd me, thrilled to see me, asking how I'm doing and why I haven't come by in a long time. Li Guang Li gets up and stretches, offering to take everyone out to Yi Ping Ju to eat later, and they all thank him. I can see that he's rather clueless, but loves to mess around and desire wealth, but he doesn't look down on the poor. If he didn't have Li Yan for a sister, he might be living a carefree life.

I walk with Fang Ru and discuss how fast time flies, we've known each other for three years now. She commends me on transforming myself into a mover and shaker in Chang An. I laugh, saying that I am really lazy and will only do things if it benefits me. I tell her that she is my first friend in Chang An, and today I want to discuss whether she wants to marry Li Yan Nian. She blushes but doesn't say anything.

I tell her that marrying him, she will be tied to the rise and fall of the Li family from now on. She assures me Li Yan Nian isn't interested in the pursuit of power, but I tell her that it doesn't matter what he wants, it's what others might do to him. She stops and thanks me for thinking about her. But she wants to marry him, this is her life and she wants to spend it beside him.

I laugh, knowing this would be her answer. I've done what I needed to do as her friend, and she thanks me for everything I've done for her. She will treasure what she has with Li Yan Nian. I will tell Li Yan Nian to come propose then, but he needs to prepare quite a wedding red envelope for me. She blushes and thanks me.

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"What did you say?" My heart jerked in pain so I asked again.

Xiao Feng hollered "I said Jiu Ye is sick, he's sick. How many times must I say it?"

I ask why he hasn't gotten a doctor for him, and why he's telling me this. He rolled his eyes at me, asking if I'm acting stupid on purpose. He's passed word to me, that's all he came to do. He runs off.

I sit and think for awhile before going to visit him. Tian Cao opens the door for me, and I ask if Jiu Ye is willing to see me. Tian Cao says of course he will, I haven't been by in months and the Bamboo Residence is so lonely. He tells me Jiu Ye caught a cold, though the doctor thinks Jiu Ye has more than that, he's got emotional worries that is making him sick.

I silently walk to the Bamboo Residence and Tian Cao lets me enter alone. I hesitate before telling myself to go in, it can't be worse than now. I walk in and the window is open with a breeze lightly blowing throw. He lays on the pallet completely still, like he is asleep. I sneak in quietly, so he shouldn't have heard me, but he calls out "Yu Er?" in a very exhausted voice.

Inside the frigid room, I walk to the pallet and put my hands on the blanket, glad it is warm inside. He pushed a warm silver ball out to me and I tell him I'm not cold, but he insists so I take it and place in on my legs, warming me up.

In the dark, we sit in silence for a long time. If we could be like this

until the end of time, I wouldn't mind.

"Jiu Ye, I have something to tell you. Please don't cut me off, or else I won't have the courage to finish. Whether you want to or not, please let me speak and then I will leave."

He was silent and I knew he wasn't stopping me. "I don't know when I started liking you, perhaps it was your warm presence under the lamplight, or when you tended to my ears. Maybe when you laughed ever so lightly. All I know is that I want to be with you. I tried to test to see if you liked me. Jiu Ye, I always told you I was sick here and there, but those were all lies. I've never gotten sick, and I'm as hale as a horse. I just wanted you to think of me every day a little, wondering what medicine to recommend for me. I'm not afraid of bitter things either, but I wanted you to worry that I wouldn't drink it. I wanted to place myself in your heart."

I smiled "Am I really sneaky? Jiu Ye, in your study that day, I know you like Zhuang Zi and Mo Zi, because they discussed weapon making and is very useful, and how small kingdoms can protect itself against the hegemony. I know you raised a lot of carrier pigeons. And last year Xi Yu needed financial assistance because of the war and the cold spell. You know a lot of Xi Yu languages, so I long suspected you were a Xi Yu person, and everything you do is to help your people."

I sneaked a peek at him and he was staring wide eyed at the ceiling, his face as still as the water. "I don't care if you are a Han or a Xi Yu person. You are you. If you want freedom, I am willing to leave Chang An with you. The desert will be our playground. If you want.....to stop the Han expansion, I can't help you win the battle, but I can help you disrupt the Han court from within, so that during your lifetime they cannot expand westward."

He turned to look at me, with shock and warmth, but I still didn't know what he was thinking.

He asked "Yu Er, did you do something secretly? Are those new businesses you opened to collect information about the secrets and

weaknesses of the Han court officials?”

I bit my lips and nodded my head. He looked torn “Silly girl, close them all down now. Shi Enterprises has been here for over a hundred years, I can gather that information easily without your help.” Suddenly he looked alarmed “Did you promise Consort Li anything?” I think about my deadly oath, but that doesn’t count, so I shake my head. He looks relieved “That’s good. Please don’t get involved in the battle for the throne.”

Jiu Y sees me fiddling with my skirt and appears to want to reach over but stops his hand. He smiles and explains that he is indeed a Xi Yu person. His grandfather was a prince from the Yi Nye kingdom who suffered a political upheaval and was spirited out of the palace. His servant captured a female wolf and used her milk to feed his grandfather. After he grew up, he never used the royal seal to find those loyal to him, and instead used his handsome looks to roam the Xi Yu lands and romancing all the princesses. One day he returned to the Yi Nye palace and woke up his uncle, who stole the throne. He shaved the king’s head and asked for a big feast. After he was done eating, he told his uncle that he was a better king than his father, and then tossed the royal seal at him and left. He then decided to become a desert thief.

He was a spectacular thief, and his logo was the sign of the wolf since he was saved by drinking the milk of a female wolf. Turned out he was a skilled businessman, and over time he became the largest stone and precious rock merchant in all of Xi Yu, in addition to being a successful desert thief. Perhaps the Gods envied his good luck, because one day he tried to rob a Han convoy and met Jiu Ye’s grandmother. He fell in love with her, but she was already a concubine to another merchant.

He followed her back to Chang An and managed to abduct her, and decided Chang An was a lot of fun so stayed here and became a merchant. I was in awe of this colorful life led by Jiu Ye’s grandfather. Over the years, his grandfather would help the Xi Yu nations oppose the Xiong Nu when the Xiong Nu was powerful. Now that the Han dynasty is more powerful, Jiu Ye continues the family way of helping, but he must do it in secret because his grandmother was a Han person and he doesn’t want to endanger the lives of the Shi family.

I think to myself that this is much more difficult and complicated than I even imagined. Jiu Ye needs to oppose Liu Che on one hand, but protect the lives of everyone in the Shi Enterprises. He helps the Xi Yu nations so they don't suffer in the war, taking into account the power of the Xiong Nu. Everyone is watching how the Shi Enterprises is doing, and one mistake everything gets thrown into disarray. He's been handling all of this since a young age, how difficult must his journey have been. Yet now he just glances over it all with a smile.

My heart leaps knowing he is confiding in me, does that mean he trusts me, and is willing to accept me? He looked at me and his eyes grew dark, and then he turned away. In the silence I speak "I know how you feel, so I'll tell you one more time. I don't need your answer now, because I won't be able to endure it. In a few days it will be New Year, and you once said that was a good day, and my birthday. I will be waiting for you in my courtyard. If you don't come, then I will know your answer. But...." I looked at him directly "I hope you will come."

I get up to leave, reminding him to close the windows. As I reach the door, he speaks "Don't turn around, just answer this question. Yu Er, do you want a family?"

I hold the door "Yes, I want a family. I want a loud boisterous family. When I'm on the street, I envy the couples carrying a child and bickering. When I heard your past I was envious, to have a grandfather, parents, and siblings. A big family is happiness! What about you?" There is only silence behind me, so I turn back around. In the dark he answers "Me, too."

That was the best thing I heard all night and I smile. He suddenly asked "Yu Er, Huo....Huo Qu Bing, is he good to you?" I was silent and didn't want to acknowledge this right now, but I can't dismiss it. I lightly nod my head. After awhile, he says "You can leave now. Be careful on the road."

I hesitated for a moment before stepping outside. When I turned I saw his dark shining eyes, filled with longing and pain all mixed together. My heart lurched and he didn't avoid my gaze. Our eyes met and it was like a

tempest. I closed the door and my arm hangs limply to the side afterwards. The door slowly closes and his face disappears from my view. This was the first time he does not avoid my gaze.

In that brief moment, all my strength feels like it's been eaten up and I weakly lean on the wall. It was much later that I had the strength to walk away.

Chapter 16: Departure

Fang Ru and Li Yan Nian are getting married and the house is merry with activity. The girls want to go crash the wedding night but I just smile and let them have fun. Hong Gu asks why I'm having Li Yan Nian move out, and I say it's better if they have their own privacy to start their new life together. Hong Gu looks at me, she thinks I've been distancing myself from them recently. I change the subject and tell her to keep the party going, begging off to rest because I'm tired.

Fang Ru is getting dressed in her room, with the ladies all happy she chose the first day of the New Year for her wedding, but Fang Ru says the date was picked by me. She's complimented on her beautiful wedding robe, and she says it's also from me. I turn around and go back to my room. Today is a good day, the weather is clear and the sun is warm. There are lanterns everywhere and the happiness in the air is thick.

I sit down and put on make up, hearing the roar of noise outside indicating that the wedding party is here to pick up Fang Ru. I feel a tinge of sadness, this sound must be what every woman longs to hear. I put on my outfit and my hair piece and look in the mirror. I think about Brother Wolf in the desert, and twirl a few times in the room. My skirt billows out and I feel much happier.

The worst feeling is waiting, with my heart suspended, just like watching a pot boil. I look around for something to keep me occupied, and I find a rope where I proceed to knot and unknot it. After some time, I look out to see it's already dusk. I walk outside and look in the yard, with the sun setting and the dark approaching.

Maybe he doesn't want to see anyone, so he won't come during the day time. He's surely coming soon, so I stand by the door hoping and praying. Everyone has gone to the wedding banquet so the courtyard is especially quiet. A few drops land my cheek first, and soon it's coming down in a flurry, the first snow. It's not a lot, and comes down slowly and gently, dancing in the wind. It feels tender, but with the bitter cold, goes

straight for the heart.

A squeak of the door opening, at that moment my heart exploded. My heart hurt so bad I couldn't turn around. Because the happiness is so hard earned, the joy even comes with some pain.

I stood still for awhile before smiling and turning around, and then my smile freezes on my face. My heart fills with despair and I close my eyes hoping it's not true. But when I open it again, he's still standing there, still Huo Qu Bing.

"When I first saw you, you were wearing this outfit. Under the silver moonlight, with a silver wolf beside you, your skirt billowing in the wind, you were so light you didn't appear human. I never once took notice of any woman, but I couldn't stop staring at you, wondering where you came from, wondering where you were going." Huo Qu Bing explained with a wistful smile.

I hold my head with my hands and crouch down on the ground. He is shocked and tries to help me up. "Don't.....don't bother with me...." I murmur over and over again. He slowly withdrew his hand.

Huo Qu Bing pays no heed to the snow on the ground, despite his rich attire, and silently sits down next to me. It appears that no matter how long I'm crouched there, he's going to silently keep me company.

The snow lightly falls on us, and he hesitates for a moment before reaching over and brushing the snow off me. I don't move, like I'm an ice sculpture. He stood up and walked into the house, emerging with a bamboo umbrella. He quietly returned to my side and opened the umbrella over me. He silently looked up at the falling white flakes.

Xiao Qian and Xiao Tao return to the yard. Xiao Qian lands next to me, but Xiao Tao zooms straight for my head. With a flicker of his sleeve, Huo Qu Bing waves Xiao Tao off course so she wasn't able to be mean to me this time. She lands next to Xiao Qian.

Huo Qu Bing goes to grab Xiao Tao and Xiao Qian wants to peck him. Huo Qu Bing avoids his beak and bops him on the head lightly "I was just getting the letter on Xiao Tao's leg, not trying to be mean to her." I hesitated and then opened the cloth on Xiao Tao's leg. "I'm sorry" is scribbled messily on it.

I'm sorry? I'm sorry! I don't want your "I'm sorry." I feel the bitterness rising and I bite my lips so hard I can taste the blood. I tried to rip the cloth but my hands are shaking and the cloth is small so I can't rend it even in a few tries.

I jump up and run into the house holding the cloth. I start tossing everything in sight. Huo Qu Bing stands at the door and watches me go insane and upending everything in my room. Scissors, where is the scissors? I still can't find the scissors, and then I see a small fruit knife on the table. I grab the knife and hear him calling me "Yu Er", and then he's in front of me, trying to take the knife away. But he stops when he sees me slicing up the cloth. He backs up and watches me rip it into shreds.

I threw the knife to the side and rip off my veil and hairdress. Using my hands, I pull it apart until the pearls have scattered everywhere and bits and pieces of the veil are floating in the air. I stare at the falling bits of blue on the ground, and suddenly all my rage is spent. I collapse on the ground and stare at everything, seeing nothing.

Huo Qu Bing sits on the door ledge, with his arms around his legs and his chin resting on his knees, just staring at the ground. He's so quiet he resembles an injured wolf, just sitting there licking his own wounds in the corner.

I don't know how much time has passed, when I suddenly hear laughter. Everyone is coming back from the banquet. I startle and jump up, quickly saying with a smile and laughter "I ate so early that I'm hungry. I want to eat birthday noodles today. Today is my birthday. I should be happy. I need to change. Can you....."

Huo Qu Bing turns his back to me and I take off my Luo Lan outfit

and put on a flaming red dress robe. I'm not sad, I refuse to be sad. I refuse to be sad because of a person who doesn't like me. I hold the blue Luo Lan outfit and repeat this to myself, but a stabbing pain passes through my heart. I recall our meeting at the Yue Ya Spring, but it feels like multiple lifetimes ago. I smile, I smile so hard my body starts to shake.

The knife comes down, and with a loud rip, the skirt has been split in half. Huo Qu Bing hears the sound and turns back towards me, with a small sigh "Why do you even bother....he gave you that?"

I tossed the skirt aside and walked out of the room. Huo Qu Bing picked up the umbrella and walked beside me. My heart is colder than the snow, so how could I fear this bitter cold. I hurry up "I want to walk in the snow." He doesn't say a word, just tossing the umbrella aside and walking in the snow with me.

I don't want to see anyone so I purposely walk in the dark areas. He suddenly asked me "Do you know how to make noodles?" I say no, and he replies "My estate keeps the kitchen fires on at night. Big dishes we can't make right now, but a bowl of noodles can be produced." Hong Gu is strict so the fires are turned off at night, so I nod and follow him.

I stare at the bowl of noodles and eat a few bites. I tried to smile and chat with Huo Qu Bing, but my tears start to fall. It falls into the soup, drops and drops of it. I hurry to pick up the bowl and eat the noodles with big bites.

Huo Qu Bing pretends he doesn't see and keeps talking. I ask "Any alcohol?" and he gets up and grabs two bottles. Along with it, he brought a towel. He doesn't look at me, and just keeps his eyes trained outside the window, looking at the snow falling in the darkness, drinking his wine.

I'm half awake and I can already smell the fragrance. When I'm fully awake, I realize that there are two silver scented heat balls hanging over the bed. This room is luxuriously appointed, and I immediately recall that I must've gotten drunk and passed out at the Huo Estate. Looking at the silver balls, I suddenly miss Brother Wolf. Right now I can only alleviate

my pain and exhaustion by putting my arms around his neck.

A maid calls out if I'm awake, and I hear Huo Qu Bing outside. He walks in "Don't lay in bed all day, it's past noon, any lazier and you won't be able to sleep tonight."

I lay there not moving and he sits down next to me on the pallet "Head hurting?" I touched my head and wonder "No, usually it hurts when I get drunk, but not today. What kind of wine did we drink last night?"

"What different wine? It's the fragrant silver balls above your head. I had the physician put some medicinal herbs in there for you."

The maid was waiting there for me, so I sigh and get up. I can't hide forever, the day keeps going on "I'm getting up, shouldn't you give me some privacy?"

He laughed and got up "Lazy cat. Move faster because I'm hungry. Any later and you'll only have table scraps to eat."

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I reach my hand out to play with the baby Liu Bo, who grabs me with his soft chubby finger, cooing back at me. I laugh and ask why he's laughing? After he's carried away by the nanny, I sit and talk with Li Yan. She teases that Liu Bo should call me auntie but I don't dare joke around like this. I confirm she's feeling better, and she asks if something happened between me and Shi Enterprises. I don't answer and change the topic, congratulating her on the news that Li Cai, Li Gan's uncle, has become the new Prime Minister. Her face doesn't move but she murmurs a soft thanks.

As I walk out, she suddenly asks me to help her. I reply "From the day I helped you into the Palace, I already told you I cannot help you within the Palace." She doesn't believe me "You're lying. Everything you do is calculated, I just don't know what you are planning."

I don't respond, because my original plan was wrong, and now I have no plan at all left. Li Yan finally asks that I never oppose her. While Empress Wei has the Great General Wei as her brother, Li Yan has no one to help her in the Palace. She wishes I were her real sister, so she wouldn't have to walk this road all alone. I look at her "You can relax. Nothing I do in the future will concern you, and I won't block your way."

She nods "You must always remember what you just said."

Before heading out, I stop "Li Yan, take good care of yourself. Read some medical books and learn to regulate your own health. The lonelier you are, the more you need to take care of yourself." She thanks him, she will do this because she has a son now.

After leaving Li Yan's chambers, I run into Huo Qu Bing. I bow to him. We head off, but I purposely walk three steps behind him. He turns to me "You are this careful in the Palace?" I remind him "You and I have different positions, if people saw us walking side by side, it would just lead to chatter." He looked annoyed and I explained further "I know you don't give a damn about this stuff, and have people who let you get away with it, but it's better to be safe and leave yourself some room for escape in any situation."

He huffed "Seeing the way you restrict yourself annoys me. In the future, don't come to the Palace unless you have to." I laugh "Have you been busy recently? Since the New Year, it's been two months since I've seen you."

His face lit up "I'm playing for big stakes this time, of course I need to prepare. Oh right, are you going back to Xi Yu or not?" I hesitated "I don't know." He was livid "You don't know? He's already this way.....and you, you still....you, you..." He was stomping away but turned back around and pointed at me. I stood there just looking back at him. He suddenly shook his head and took off, like he wanted to shake all the unpleasantness away "I think you're a masochist, just itching to be mistreated. Yet I'm even worse of a masochist than you, simply dying to be mistreated!"

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The gardener checks on the vines, telling me it's not sprouted by now, it's likely dead. He wanted to buy new ones for me but I say it's not necessary. A guest arrives, and it's Housekeeper Chen from the Huo Estate. He bowed to me and explained "Since the young master has been so busy recently, he's rarely home and can't find the time to come. He wanted me to tell you that he's leaving for Xi Yu tomorrow at dawn." I thanked him, while he gave me a warm twinkling smile.

After dinner, I return to my room and sit there in a daze, not sure what I'm thinking about. I lit the lamp and took out a small brazier. From the chest I removed all the diary cloths. It makes me smile, but then I know that sometimes all the hopes and hard work still only ends up with heartbreak. I toss the first cloth in the fire, letting it burn in a bright red blaze. I continue to read each entry and then burn it. I burn a few more before I stop, deciding that since I wrote these for him, might as well let him read it now. Nothing left to lose, and a way to end this for good.

I pick up the gold jade earrings and put it in the chest. I pick up the Xiang Fei Zhu flute and play a few notes. I'm cleaning up the things related to you. If only I could clean up my heart the way I'm cleaning up this room, easily throwing things out, perhaps there would be less sorrow and anger in this world.

I wander outside the Shi Estate for awhile before vaulting over. Outside the Bamboo Residence, I leave the chest at the door. After some time, I start playing the flute. The light suddenly turns on inside and the door opens. Jiu Ye stands there on his crutch. In the dark, his face is white with shock. I finish playing three times before I stop. I tell him "You once said that I was not suited to play the Bai To Ying tune because it was so sorrowful. Today I finally understand. With my emotions connecting with the tune, I should have played it well. But I wish I could never play it well, that I would never understand its meaning."

At the end, I control myself, and with a hard clean snap, I've broken the flute in half. Before the broken halves of the flute have even hit the

ground, I've vaulted on the roof. I hesitate for a moment but it is still silence below. I shake my head and fly forward, completely and utterly given up.

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Hong Gu,

I'm gone. When you find this letter you will be furious. Please don't be angry, which will just give you more wrinkles. I'm giving you all the businesses I run in Chang An. You must remember that the dancing business, you need to teach the girls well and treat them well. You might want to close down some of the businesses, or at least not expand anymore, and just protect what you already have. Burn this letter after reading it. I have left another detailed business plan for you. I know I'm being immature, but I've tried hard to be a Chang An person since coming here. I try to control my words and actions, but now I suddenly feel exhausted. I miss the freedom of my life in Xi Yu. So I'm leaving, and maybe one day I'll come back. Or maybe I'll never come back. Please don't miss me, Hong Gu. And one last thing – in 10 days to 1 month, please deliver this other letter to the Huo Estate.

Yu Er

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Xiao Huo,

I'm going back to Xi Yu. I'm sorry but I won't be going with you. When you see this cloth, it should be a few months later already, when you return victorious yet again to the Palace. Perhaps I will be off chasing a sheep with Brother Wolf. Or maybe doing nothing except watching the sun set over the West. You asked me, are tangled vines really how complicated life ought to be? I thought about it, and perhaps life really is like the gold silver flower vines. But it's not about being tangled up. Flowers bloom and flowers wilt. When the gold silver flowers meet, it twists and turns, like

meeting and then departing. Fate binds and fate separates, this vine is but a representation of life's many gatherings and partings. This time my decision is to turn and leave. This parting might lead to never meeting again. I wish you all the best.

Xiao Yu

Epilogue: Wishing for Twin Stars

In the dark night, she's dressed in red, like a burning flame.

Meng Jiu knew she was in a bad mood, because normally she disliked wearing vibrant colors. But when she's in a bad mood, she'll force herself to wear something bright. Like the color would tell the world that she's perfectly fine, hiding her sadness and weakness inside the bold hue.

Her eyes are filled with fire as well, giving the lonely Bamboo Residence a bit of warmth. He desperately wanted to keep the warmth by his side, but he couldn't. This woman, who came and went like the wind, her life as vibrant as the morning dew, he wanted her to always live under the bright light. He wanted her to have the most complete happiness, without a single flaw in her life.

He asked her "Do you want a family?" and she said yes. He wanted it too, but he couldn't give it to her. The fire in her eyes, was it love or hate? When she broke the flute, his heart also shattered. The look in her eyes when she looked at him, it was dead within. Did she hate him for not saying a single word? If only she knew, that he was afraid to say even one word, because then he would ask her to stay.

The red shadow disappears over the rooftop and he controls himself from calling out. His heart is in pain, and he coughs up some blood. He's been sick, and now with this emotional pain, he barely has the strength to stand. He tosses the crutch aside and sits down on the door step. He pulls the chest over and takes out cloth after cloth of her feelings for him. She knew so much more than he thought, and did so much more for him than he knew.

Reading each word, his heart started to burn, and his body felt like ice. Did he really have this happiness? He reads more and then his face suddenly lights up. He calls out for his servants and immediately heads out. The sun is barely rising from the East, like her brilliant smile. He stared at the rising sun and felt happiness and pain. Yu Er, Yu Er, I really

underestimated you. I've hurt you so badly, but I will use my entire life to make it up to you. From now on, I won't let you have a single second of sadness.

The carriage arrives at Luo Yu House and already he can hear the commotion. Hong Gu is yelling at everyone for not seeing anything. He's introduced to Hong Gu, who is shocked this beautiful young man is the Big Boss. She thought to herself – that arrogant son of the Heavens Huo Qu Bing, like the brightest sun and the sturdiest oak, I thought he and Yu Er was the most perfect match in this world. But who knew there was a man like this, his pale moon a contrast to the bright sun, neither winning out over the other.

Jiu Ye is in a rush to see Yu Er, but Hong Gu tearfully explains that she's gone, and says she won't be coming back anymore. Jiu Ye's heart jerks and he starts coughing violently. Yu Er, I knew your true feelings only after I read the clothes, and now I know how deeply you must be hurt. Hong Gu explains Yu Er's letter revealed she was headed to Xi Yu. She also left a letter for General Huo, to be delivered in a few days, but Hong Gu was so mad she sent it already to the Huo Estate.

Tian Cao immediately assures Jiu Ye that he will send people to find her, and that all of Xi Yu will be looking for her. Jiu Ye wants all the courts of the Xi Yu kingdoms notified so that their armed forces can join in the search. Tian Cao is shocked, knowing that Jiu Ye has never asked for help from those countries to keep his connection with them on the down low. He must really be determined to find Yu Er this time.

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It is still dark outside but Huo Qu Bing has already dressed in his armor, ready for deployment. "Did you tell her I was leaving today for war?" Housekeeper Chen confirmed that he told her personally. Huo Qu Bing stood at the front door for some time, until the sun gradually began to rise. His heart sighed, looks like she still wants to stay in Chang An. He packed up all his emotions and leaped on the horse. The sound of the horse hooves on the ground ringing through Chang An's streets.

Love and personal feelings need to be set aside for now. His mission is to focus on this war, which the entire court is waiting to see him fail. Last time he took 800 men and ambushed the Xiong Nu army base, emerging victorious. But people were still not satisfied, calling it a lucky victory. Even the Emperor remains wary, not ready to give him a full army to lead into war. Some generals spend an entire lifetime and never become a Grand Duke. He's just 18 years old and already his battle victory is renowned around the world, leaving people envious and ready to see him fail.

This time he's been given ten thousand men, as a test of his capabilities by the Emperor. Only by succeeding can he shut the traps of those scholar officials in court. Huo Qu Bing already knew he would succeed. Or more accurately, the word "failure" does not appear in his vocabulary. Anything he wants to do, he can do it, except....

He thought of that crafty stubborn girl and he shook his head. He glanced towards Luo Yu House and his initial cold expression warmed up a bit. No, there is no except. In Huo Qu Bing's life, there is nothing he can't achieve, much less her.

After a day of travel, when he's about to rest, a letter arrives for him. It's not an army dispatch, but from Housekeeper Chen. His heart lurched and he opened it. After reading the letter, his eyes saw red. All the pain in his heart coalesced together. Yu Er, you lied to me yet again.

He stared intently at the cloth, and slowly a small icy smile appeared on his lips. This is her first letter to him, but it will not be her last letter to him. He stood up and called out of the tent "Have the two fastest horse prepared and ready to leave at any time." Yu Er, you can't possibly be harder to chase than the wily Xiong Nu?